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by C. H. Cogswell

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

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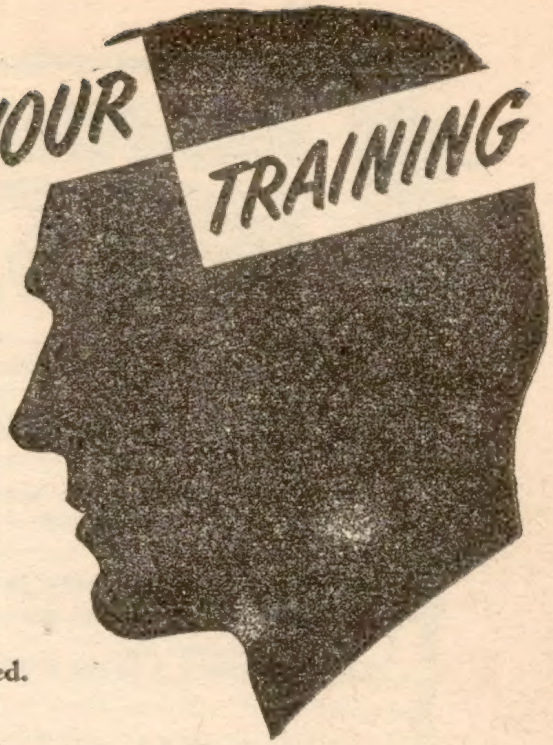

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FAMOUS WESTERN

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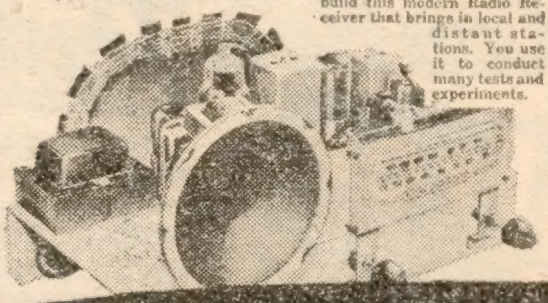

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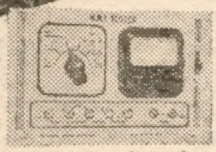

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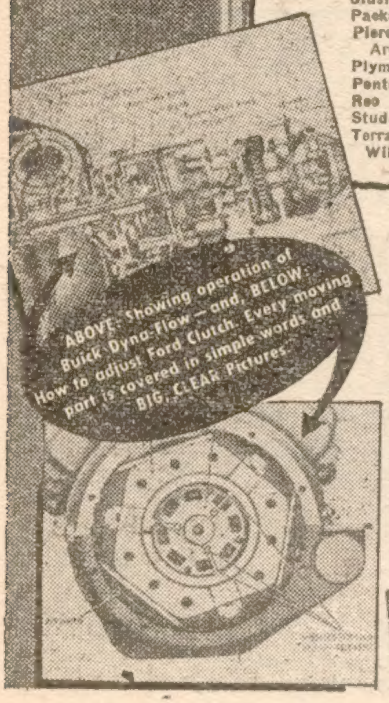
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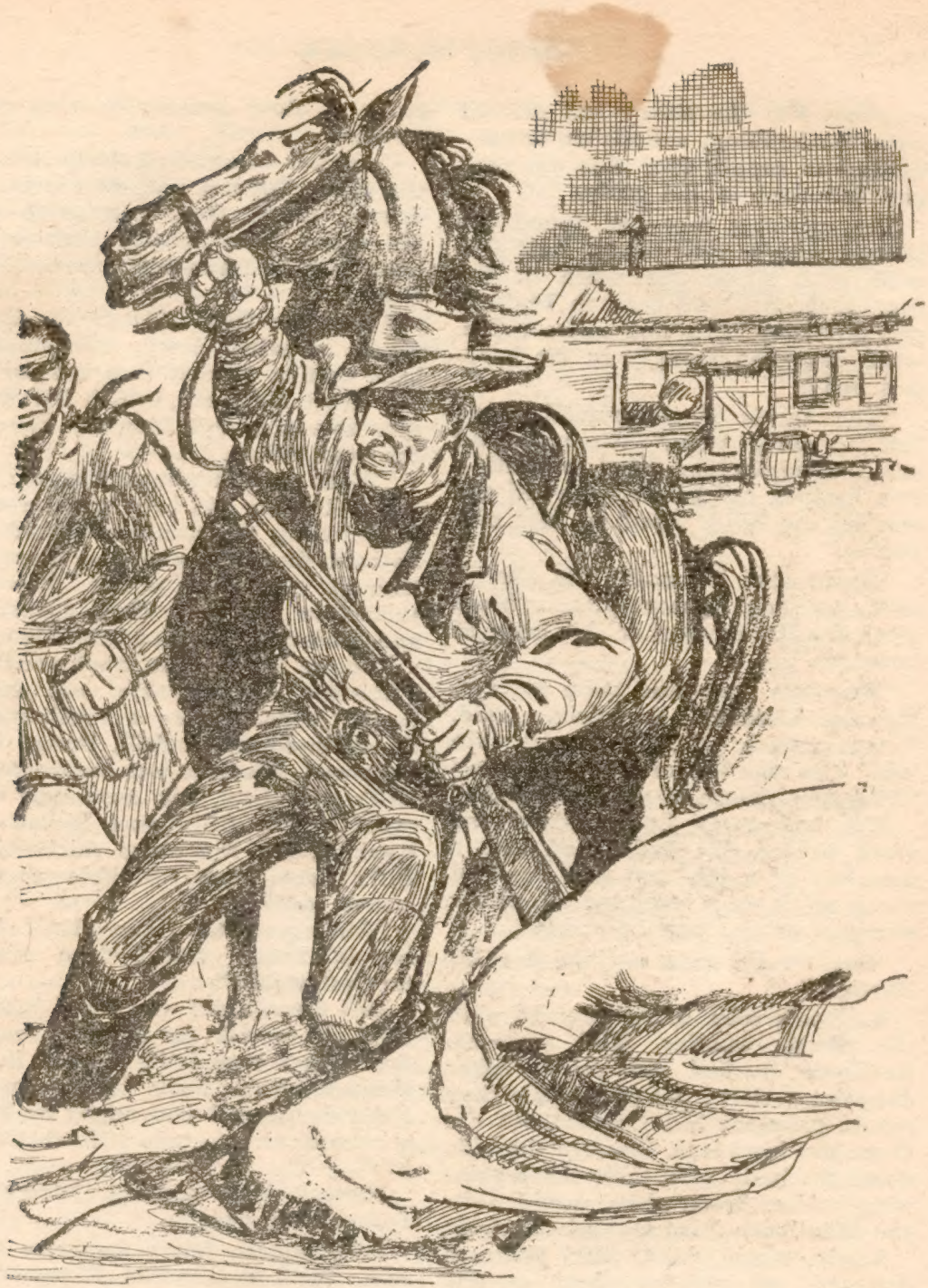
by Lee Floren



Other men — good men — had died trying to get the deadwood on those beaver poachers, but Bill Dupree knew he wasn't bulletproof. Bill needed help in this job — and how could he tell who was a friend, if he had a friend!

BREATH HANGING on the cold winter-air, Game Warden Bill Dupree sat his pinto and watched Ed Rawson's men skin the dead sheep. Bill Dupree watched the men and teams work, and Bill's dark eyes were thoughtful.

The blizzard had died down toward morning. But it had turned the gully below into a death-trap for the

woolies. For the sheep had drifted with the howling, sleet-laden wind—drifted to topple over this cut-bank and fall dead in the gully.

The morning they had found the sheep-herder's stiff body, half-covered with snow, out there in the sagebrush. Bill had been in Dodson, the Montana town five miles north, when they had brought in the herder's body.

"The Circle F sheep-outfit done lost a whole band," the man had said. "Sheep-herder froze to death—he's back in my bobsled—an' all the woolies are dead. Piled up in a cut-coulee."

"Damn that blizzard," the sheriff said, spitting tobacco-juice. "More work for Ed Rawson an' his crew of buzzards."

"The boss done sold them pelts to Rawson already," the driver said. "Two cents a pelt, Rawson to skin 'em." The man looked at Bill Dupree. "There's a chance to get a job, fella."

Bill had come into Dodson the week before. He had acted like a man out of a job, and had inquired about work on a local spread, either sheep or cattle. Now he nodded.

"Reckon I'll ride out an' see Ed Rawson."

Rawson's men knew how to skin the dead woolies, Bill noticed. Skinners worked in pairs. After dragging a sheep out of the pile they would split the hide inside both the front and hind legs, then rip the hide down the belly with their sharp skinning-knifes. Then they would skin the hide loose from around the neck.

Their work done, the skinners dragged out another dead woolie. Now two teams, double-trees dragging in the snow, came up to the first sheep. While one team of horses was hooked with a small chain to the dead sheep's front feet, the other team was hooked to the loose hide on the sheep's neck.

Bill watched, interested. The team hitched to the front feet stood fast; the other team pulled. This way the pelt was torn from the dead sheep. This saved much skinning with a knife, a slow process in this cold weather.

Carcasses of skinned sheep littered the snow. Coyotes and wolves would devour these. One man piled the hides flat on a bobsled that would haul them to Rawson's farm on Milk River.

There the flesh side of the hides would be salted down, then shipped back east to market in a box-car on the Great Northern, which had built into this northern Montana country the year before.

"What do you want, stranger?"

Bill Dupree had been so interested in watching the skinners he had not noticed the man who had come up through the loose snow. Now he turned in saddle, a little surprised, and looked at the man below him.

"You're Ed Rawson, ain't you?"

Rawson nodded. He was squat. heavy, wide. Under a muskrat-cap, he squinted up at Bill, brown eyes narrowed. His face was square where Bill's was lean, his nose was flattened where Bill's was Indian and hawkish, his lips were thick where Bill's were thin. Stubble covered coarse jowls.

"Ain't you the bum that's been hangin' aroun' the Dodson saloons the last week?"

Bill disregarded the word *bum*. "I rode out to ask for a job. I was in town when that fella brought in the sheep-herder's body this mornin'. Fella mentioned you might be hirin' a hand or two to help with this skinnin'."

Rawson kept peering. "You're an *Injun*, ain't you?"

Bill Dupree felt a hardness enter him. With the Indian Wars still a bitter memory in this section, a half-breed was considered in the same low class as a fullblood. But he kept his temper down.

"I'm a halfbreed, if it's any of your business. But I came to ask for a job, Rawson, not to discuss the human race."

"Ain't hirin' no Injuns."

Bill said, almost idly, "I'm a good trapper. I trapped last winter in the Black Hills." He appeared, to the on-

looker, to be idly watching the skinning-crew. But from the corner of his eyes he watched Ed Rawson.

"I ain't hirin' nobody, not even any trappers." Rawson watched him steadily. "I farm down on the basin. With these sheep freezin' to death, an' the sheepmen not wantin' to skin them, I bought their pelts. I can't use a trapper or a skinner, Injun."

THERE IT was again...*Injun!* The derisive word brought anger to Bill Dupree, and this showed across his dark face. But he had a job here on this Milk River range—a job that required a clear head. Maybe he had made the wrong statement when he had mentioned he was a good trapper. But he had been feeling Ed Rawson out; maybe no damage had been done.

"Long ride for nothin'," Bill murmured.

A skinner stood about forty feet away, listening to Ed Rawson and Bill talk. He was a stocky man, almost as wide as Rawson; they had pointed him out as Al Ganns, down in Dodson. According to what Bill had heard, Al Ganns was Ed Rawson's strawboss.

Bill Dupree felt the imprint of Ganns' small eyes. Ganns, he had heard, was a tough gent—he'd had quite a few rough-and-tumble fights down in Dodson, and he had won them all. As far as that was concerned, Ed Rawson was no slouch with his fists, his knife, or his gun.

Ed Rawson and Al Ganns had come into this section two years before and had taken up adjoining homesteads. But Ganns had sold out to Rawson and in turn had been hired as Rawson's top-man. Rawson had brought out other farmers too, and now the man controlled deeds to some of the best grazing-land on Milk River.

Bill Dupree had made his questions discreet, and had never appeared too anxious. A man can learn a lot by keeping his mouth closed and his ears peeled back. The farmers had come in, and a dry year had broken most of them—then Rawson had stepped in, beating the two

local cowoutfits to the punch, and Rawson had bought deeds to the farms from the farmers, who then left this section of Montana.

Two cowoutfits ran here, the Bar S on the north side of the Milk, the Box 7 on the south. From what Bill had heard, each outfit had expected the farmers to settle, then find out this river-bottom was no good for farming without irrigation. The cowmen had then looked for the farmers to leave. The range would then go back to normal after the cattlemen had jerked down the barbwire fences left by the hoemen.

But Ed Rawson had fooled the cowmen. Rawson had stepped in, bought deeds, and before the Bar S and Box 7 knew what was going on, Ed Rawson controlled lots of the river range. By that time it was too late for the cow-outfits to do anything. And Milk River had a new embryo cattle-king started.

Some wondered where Ed Rawson got the money to swing these deals. Of course, the farmers sold out for small sums, but Rawson had bought out quite a few of them. Bill Dupree also wondered where Rawson got the money. That's why Bill was on this Milk River range.

Nobody here knew Bill was a game-warden. He remembered standing in the office down in Miles City.

"Bill, beaver pelts are coming out of the Milk River country. We've traced them from St. Louis to around Dodson and Malta and in that country. You've never been up there, have you?"

"No, sir."

Head Game Warden Matt Driscoll had walked to the wall map there in his warm office. Outside the sleet pounded against the storm-window. The game-warden's thumb found a spot on the map and pushed down.

"Right around here, Bill."

Bill had studied the map. "When do I leave, Matt?"

"Today, if you want to." Bill had nodded and gone to the door. Then Matt Driscoll's voice had stopped him. "Be careful on this, Bill. Sign points to a man named Ed Rawson. He's said to be dangerous. He's got a side-kick called Al Ganns. Ganns has been in trouble with the law back east. I can't find anything on Rawson. Of course, our information might be wrong."

Bill had saddled the pinto and ridden north. He was but one year out of Haskell, and he had gotten into government work right away after graduation. He had found out little in his stay around Dodson.

His only clue pointing toward Rawson was that one night a man, plainly a trapper, had come into town. He had asked the whereabouts of Rawson and then Bill had followed him to Rawson's spread. That same trapper was now trapping on the upper fork of Beaver Creek.

Whether he trapped for Rawson, or trapped for himself, Bill Dupree did not know. He had followed the trapper on a trap-line one day. The man had caught a mink, two muskrats, but no beaver.

But it was hard to catch a man trapping beaver. He could set traps over night, pull them out at dawn, and the snow would cover his tracks within a few minutes. For it snowed almost every night.

And the snow covered tracks quickly.

Bill had gotten exactly nowhere in his week on this range. Furs were coming into St. Louis, but how they got there—nobody seemed to know. But government men had picked up a bunch and, from the hair growth and color, had decided they were poached Milk River beaver.

Trappers for a century or more had made great inroads on the beaver population. And Montana, recently admitted to statehood, had quickly passed laws against beaver trapping to keep beaver pelts from getting extinct. Other states had passed a similar law. As a result, beaver pelts became scarce, and the pelts immediately jumped to a new high. A good skin was dragging down fifty bucks on the St. Louis market. Twenty beaver, a good night's catch meant a thousand bucks...

Good money for a few hours work and a few hours of danger.

These thoughts ran through Bill Dupree as he sat his pinto, looking down at Ed Rawson's ugly face. He looked from Rawson to Al Ganns. The foreman had come forward, overshoes dragging in the snow, his eyes on Bill.

"What does the Injun want, Ed?"

"A job, Al."

Al Ganns kept watching Bill. His eyes were sharp, and Bill wondered if the man were not a little drunk. He knew Ganns was a hard drinker.

Ganns said, "A job, huh? You have one for him, Ed?"

"No job."

Ganns nodded. "We don't need no Injuns on this crew. A Injun's no good. Good for nothin'. Or are you only a damn' halfbreed, fella?"

The challenge, mean, ugly, lay on the cold air.

2

BILL DUPREE had been in the act of turning his pinto. He wanted no trouble. Skinners and teamsters had heard Al Ganns' words, and now they were watching him to see if he would take up Ganns' challenge.

Bill got the impression they were vultures. Vultures, standing there in the snow, studying him for the kill.

There was this feeling, and with it a feeling of disgust. Not so much anger as disgust.

This was a tough outfit. These vultures were watching him, hoping he would fight, just as Al Ganns was watching him, that look of hope in his narrowed eyes. Brains, and the ability to think, meant nothing to them. They based power upon only one foundation: brute strength.

Now these vultures watched, buzzards out of climate and locale; buzzards perched in snow. And Bill decided to ride away. For a moment, he had halted the pinto; now, disgusted, angry, he turned him even further.

And Al Ganns said, as only as Al Ganns could say it, "The 'breed is yellow, too. Injuns are that way. Get one white man an' six 'breeds, an' the 'breeds got courage. But get one white man an' one 'breed together an' the 'breed'll run, jes' like this Injun's doin'!"

A skinner laughed. A hollow sound. Like a wind rubbing together the knotty branches of an old cottonwood tree. And it had a grating effect on Bill Dupree. It rubbed him like pumice rubs.

"Maybe you're wrong," Bill said quietly.

Ganns said, "Can you prove I'm wrong?"

Bill saw right away he had said the wrong thing. For that matter, anything he said would be twisted around to suit Ganns' fancy. He looked at Ed Rawson. Rawson had a wide, nasty grin on his wide, ugly face.

"Yellow," Rawson said.

Bill felt anger, held it, nursed it. He looked back at Ganns. "I came out here lookin' for a job, not for trouble." For a moment he had another thought: Did this pair know he was a game-warden? This seemed to patent, too set-up, too sure. Ganns wanted trouble, and wanted it right now. And with a man who was a stranger to him. With a halfbreed...

Head Game Warden Matt Driscoll had promised Bill's trip into Milk River would be held in confidence and he and Bill would be the only ones to know about the northward trek. But had word leaked out to Ed Rawson and Al Ganns? Did the pair know his identity?

Maybe they did. Maybe Driscoll's suspicions had been correct. Maybe Rawson was trapping beaver. And now Ganns wanted to kill him? Bill Dupree read much conjecture in this set of thoughts. He decided to avoid trouble. He had himself now, and his anger was gone.

"I want no trouble."

Al Ganns moved forward. One mittened hand grabbed the reins, right above the bit. The pinto stopped, held in a vise-like grip.

Ganns said, "Get off that bronc, 'breed. No damn' 'breed is insultin' Al Ganns, believe you me!"

Bill realized he could dodge trouble no longer. If he tried to keep from fighting, Ganns would look upon his words as words of cowardice—he would reach up and pull Bill from the pinto. There was no dodging this. That knowledge was a sharp-toned bell, the sound knife-like as it ran through him.

There was only one thing he could do. And he did it.

HIS RIGHT boot came out of stirrup. He kicked, and he kicked right for Al Ganns' heavy jaw. He was thankful he had not worn overshoes. Had he an overshoe over his boot, his kick would not have been as destructive and damaging.

"His boot!" Ed Rawson hollered.

Too late Ganns saw the boot coming. He jerked his hand away from the reins and flung up his forearm to attempt to block the kick. But Bill's boot tore across the forearm and landed on Al Ganns' jaw.

Bill felt the crunch of his toe on flesh, and took a savage elation from it. Ganns outweighed him by thirty pounds, but Bill figured some of those pounds were fat and sloppy. As for himself, he was younger than Ganns by a few years, and he was still tough and flat-bellied from college football.

Ganns, of course, wouldn't know this. Ganns classified all Indians and halfbreeds under one catagory: cowards and sneaks. Ganns did not know either, that Bill had done a lot of boxing back at Haskell. Not rough and tumble, but boxing. And the game-warden knew this would help him now.

Ganns went back, arms hooking for a handhold in air. He found none and sat down, awkward and big in the snow. By the time Ganns got to his feet, Bill had dismounted. Bill stood there, fists up. He had dropped his mittens into the snow.

"Okay, fella."

Ganns got his right hand down, burying it in the snow, and he lifted himself on it, never taking his gaze from Bill. He came up slowly, all the more impressive because of his slowness.

"First Injun I ever met that'd fight." Ganns hissed the words. "But like all 'breeds, he kicks an' fights dirty!"

Ganns spat blood.

Rawson said, "Finish him, Al!"

Forgotten was the skinning. The two teamsters dropped lines in the snow and ran forward. The teams stood stolidly, unconcerned with the follies and weaknesses of men, and glad for the rest.

"Get him, Al!"

Ganns moved forward, crouched. Bill moved to one side. His pinto was behind him and if he had to retreat suddenly he was afraid the pinto might stop him. He had his plan of fighting already conceived. He would not fight Al Ganns close; to do this would be dangerous.

For if he let Ganns get his arms around him in a bear-hug.... Ganns had too much weight, too much strength. They were circling now, tromping the snow down, watching each other. They were circling, two wolves—soon one would find an opening, and fangs would click and snarl.

Bill said, "I still don't want to fight."

"You'll fight now!" Ganns grunted the words. "You can't back out now. Come a few minutes an' this man'll have Injun for supper—"

Ganns never finished his sentence. The last words were lost in his rush. And, although Bill had expected the rush, still the speed and deceptiveness of the big man almost caught him off-guard.

Ganns came in and Bill hit. He felt his knuckles grate on flesh, digging through whisker-stubble to twist into the flesh and rip it. Bill got in two blows, and Ganns got in one. A mauling blow. A hard, bearish hit that smashed into Bill's chest. Flung wild, but hard as though a boulder had hit Bill Dupree.

Bill's lung burned. He had taken them before, straight on and swinging; this, though, was the hardest he had ever taken. If this was a sample of Al Ganns' hitting, he wanted no more of it. One sample was plenty.

Ganns' right had hit him. Bill decided he wanted no more of that right. He would circle to the left, then, when that right came in again, he would be traveling with it, and the blow would mean less. He figured he had hit Ganns with about all he owned. It had slowed Ganns, but it had not stopped him.

Accordingly he moved in a circle, and Ganns stood still. Ganns couldn't savvy this kind of fighting. Bill had hit him twice; he'd connected only once. The men he had fought had been proud of their strength. They had waded in, arms wide, and clinched in a contest of bare strength. They had used no science.

GANNS moved ahead, his right working. Bill blocked it with his left forearm, then crossed the right, and again he gave Ganns all he could dish out. And again Ganns took it. Took it with his head stolid. Took it and waded in.

Bill retreated fast, hitting as he went. He could hear the Rawson men yelling for him to make a fight of it and not to run. But he wasn't taking their advice. He wasn't even heeding it. It was a dim sound, somewhere outside the throb of his ears; it was water washing against sand, and meaningless.

By now, Bill was in the fight... for good. Gone was his hesitation, his lack of desire. Ganns had hurt him; this thought was first. The second was that he'd get Ganns or Ganns would get him. With this was the thought that Ganns had more than a mere fight behind this.

Ganns wanted to kill him, he knew. Every movement, every grimace, told Bill that. He was as sure of that as he was sure he was in the toughest fight in his twenty-four years.

Or was he wrong?

Then he realized that if this pair was involved in beaver-poaching, every stranger on this range would be a potential enemy to them, until that stranger proved himself out of danger against them. But this assumption was lost in the heat of the fighting.

Ganns caught him by the sleeve; Bill tried to jerk away. They went down in the snow together, and Ganns was on top. Bill felt the man's hot breath, heard Ganns' panted words, meaningless and without form. Ganns was winning, for Bill had allowed himself to go down.

But Bill Dupree had done some wrestling, too. His main aim was to get back on his feet. He got his boots in Ganns' belly. He straightened his knees and kicked as hard as he could kick. Ganns rolled with it, and landed in the snow on his side, a few feet away.

Bill got hurriedly to his feet. His nose was bleeding. Ganns had given him punishment, there in the snow. Ganns expected him to jump on him, and Ganns rolled, getting away. Bill followed but did not leap on the man. He wanted no more of Ganns' rough-and-tumble...

Both of them were winded. The fight, to Bill, seemed to have gone on for hours. But he knew it had lasted only a few minutes. He got a glimpse of the Rawson men, still buzzards perched in the snow; buzzards that did not chatter, for their man was getting the worst of it.

Rawson was to one side, swearing that Ganns get up. The curses were heard by Bill, seemingly coming from a long distance, as he circled

Ganns, who had gotten to his knees. Bill sucked in ice-cold air that, despite its chill, seemed to burn his lungs. That first mauling blow was still with him.

"Get up, fella!"

Even his own voice sounded distant.

Ganns panted, "I'm comin', 'breed!"

The brief rest had given Ganns added strength. But it had also given Bill Dupree his second wind. Ganns did not rush now; he stood still, fists up. And in so doing, he fought the fight Bill wanted.

Still, Bill Dupree circled. He went into a crouch, fought from it; he stood up, and fought straight out. He saw the frown of puzzlement groove Al Ganns' wide forehead. Ganns had never fought like this before.

Bill's knuckles knocked that frown flat. Ganns hit and missed; Bill stepped in. He went under Ganns' arm, for Bill now fought from a crouch.

For a moment, Ganns was wide-open. Just for a moment...

And Bill used that moment.

He brought in his left, first. Whipped it into Ganns' bloody jaw. Turned the knuckles as he came in, making a twisting hammer. Then the right followed. Ganns' head had lopped back. The right buried itself

against the whiskery jaw. Turned, dug, stunned.

Ganns grunted something, then went back. Bill was on him, boots shuffling, the end in sight. Nostrils quivering. On him with another left, another right. And still Ganns kept his feet. He even flung out a wild right.

But Bill's head was clear. He was fighting with science, chopping his man down, laying him low. Ganns seemed born to stand on his feet. Bill knew he had little left. He fed the man the blows.

He rocked Ganns' head, rolling it on the thick neck. He knocked the man back, and he followed. Ganns was groaning something, but Bill kept on. The vultures were silent now. They did not chatter. No chatter.

Then Bill dropped him.

It was a clean blow—a right. It turned Ganns and Ganns went down, falling on his side. Bill stood, panting, breath sobbing. Ganns was out. He knew that. He had hit them that way before on that same spot. And they had gone down and out. And stayed that way for a while.

"Ganns is down!"

The voice rang with disbelief. Bill grabbed air, his arm feeling like lead was tied to each fist. His forearms ached. He had hit and hit with all his weight behind him.

Rawson growled, "Somebody else'll go down, too!"

Bill pivoted to face the man. But already Rawson was hitting. Bill flung up an arm—too late. Rawson's knuckles found the soft spot under his ear. Bill dimly remembered falling.

He landed sitting-down. He had the foolish thought, "They accused a halfbreed of being yellow, now he slugs me from the side. He's the yellow son." He could see Rawson coming toward him. He knew the man was only ten feet away, yet in his dazed condition Rawson looked a long ways away. About fifty feet.

Bill knew, then, he was close to out.

He got up, getting to one knee. His legs failed him. Rawson was closer, fists doubled. Suddenly, Rawson stopped.

A voice said, "Don't move toward him, or I'll kill you!"

3

THEN BILL DUPREE sat down again. He looked toward the voice and saw a man standing beyond the vultures. He was small, not more than five feet tall, and the rifle looked as big as a cannon, there in his small wizened hands.

He was a stranger to Bill. And that made this more unreal—a stranger coming to his aid, a small old man with a face as homely as a dried-up prune, and just as grooved by wind and rain and snow.

Rawson growled, "You stay out of this, Jim Overcast."

So that was his name...Jim Overcast. And Rawson knew him. That meant the old gent was a resident around here. But why would he buck Rawson to help a stranger? But maybe he liked fair-play. Some men still were honest, Bill had heard.

Bill's vision steadied, and the roaring left his ears. Behind Jim Overcast he saw a mule with a saddle. Not often you found a man riding a mule in the cow-country. But why think of that, Bill Dupree?

"I ain't stayin' out." Bill heard Jim Overcast's dry chuckle. "Here I am, ridin' out to court a widder, an' I run acrost this mess. This button beat Ganns fair an' square. You jumped on him when his back was turned, Rawson."

"Put down that rifle!"

Jim Overcast's thin lips showed a smile, but it lacked mirth just like a dried-up spring lacks water. Overcast shook his head, the flaps of his muskrat cap wobbling.

"Not till this young bucko's in saddle." Overcast looked at Bill. "When you feel ready, button, climb into leather."

"Thanks," Bill said.

Al Ganns sat up. He wiped blood from his nose. He looked at Bill Dupree. The game-warden expected the

Rawson man to say something. Ganns opened his mouth slightly, like a fish gasping for air. Then evidently he changed his mind. His jaws clipped shut.

"Good idea," Jim Overcast said.

Ed Rawson was silent. The buzzards perched wordlessly in the snow, watching. A work-horse shifted, tug-chain making a cold, dismal noise. Ganns kept watching Bill as Bill mounted with difficulty.

"Pick up his mittens," Overcast ordered a skinner.

The skinner handed the mittens to Bill. Bill had his .45 out now, taking it from under his mackinaw. He looked at Jim Overcast.

"You ride up thataway about fifty yards, fella." Overcast spoke quietly. "Then turn your hoss toward this bunch an' keep your gun on 'em whilst I get my mule an' ride toward you."

Bill nodded.

Bill rode the distance, then drew rein and put his gun on the Rawson men. The precaution, he figured, was useless; still, a man never knew for sure. But he was danged glad old Jim Overcast had happened in at the right time. Rawson would have beaten him to a pulp.

Jim Overcast got his stirrup, went up on his mule, and rode over to where Bill Dupree waited, grinning widely. The oldster seemed to take genuine pleasure in finding trouble. When he got opposite Bill, Overcast looked back.

The Rawson men stood watching them. Not a man said anything, but Bill knew they were plenty mad. Rawson stood wide-legged, watching them, and Ganns was sitting on a log, paying them no attention. Ganns had had his share of trouble this day, Bill figured.

Bill Dupree felt of his bottom lip, about two times its normal size. One eye was almost shut and he figured he was a real good-looking specimen of game-warden. He was glad his boss, Driscoll, couldn't see him.

Overcast scowled. "The fight's all outa them buckos, son. Reckon you can put that pistol away now." He chuckled, voice dry. "They're low, but they don't dare shoot one of us in the back."

Bill gave his pinto the spurs and Jim Overcast's mule hit a fast lope. The mule was fast, Bill noticed. And old Overcast rode him like he was born in the saddle. They got a mile away and Bill pulled in.

"Your face," Jim Overcast said. "Don't take no offense, younker, but it looks like you fell head-first into a corn-grinder."

Bill grinned. "Bet I won't win no beauty contest." He stuck out his sore right hand. "I'm Bill Dupree. Thanks for givin' me the boost, Overcast. If you hadn't helped me, Rawson'd whipped hell outa me."

"I'd do even the same for one of my brothers, Bill."

BILL DUPREE headed toward Dodson. The afternoon was running out for the winter days were short. Storm-clouds banked on the northwest; there was no wind, though. His thoughts kept running back to Rawson and the fight with Al Ganns.

"'T'ain't none of my business, but I would cotton to know what you two was strugglin' about." Jim Overcast spat tobacco-juice.

Bill told him about Al Ganns picking a fight. He did not, of course, tell the oldster about him being a game-warden. Nobody on this range was going to know that until the right time came.

"Ganns likes to fight, all right." Overcast shook his head sadly. "A terrible trait for a human bein', bad enough in a dog. But he sure must like to fight good if he jus' picks a fight with a total stranger."

Bill sent the old man a quick look. "Hard for me to understand, Overcast. But here you're headin' into town with me. An' back yonder you said you was ridin' out to court a widow."

"Jes' a story I made up. I rid over there lookin' for a job skinnin', jes' like you did. But after helpin' you I know danged well it was no use hittin' up Brother Rawson for a situation."

Bill liked the old man's company. Old Overcast was the first man he had really enjoyed talking to since he had come to this Milk River country. And the old man talked readily.

"Drifted in about two months ago, Bill. Figgered I'd settle down, an' see what it felt like."

Jim Overcast had bought a deed to one-hundred and sixty acres from a farmer, and Ed Rawson had not liked it one bit. Later Jim had found out Rawson had been dickering over this land with the same farmer and the farmer had sold to Jim Overcast because Overcast had unknowingly paid him more money than Rawson would have paid. And Rawson had ridden into Overcast's farm.

"Mister," Rawson had said, sitting his bronc, "you paid too much for this land, didn't you?"

At first, according to Overcast, the old man had not understood what Rawson was driving at. No, he had got a fair bargain, he figured. Rawson elaborated. Overcast had paid more for the land than Rawson was in the habit of paying.

"And I don't want these farmers expectin' too much, savvy? You set a bad example for me."

Overcast had assured he would buy no more land. A quarter-section was plenty for him. And Rawson had ridden away, apparently satisfied.

"The Bar S tried to buy a piece of land," Overcast said, "but Rawson overbid that outfit, an' got it."

"He must have lots of money."

Jim Overcast spit. "He must have, button."

By the time they reached Dodson, Bill Dupree felt somewhat better. His eye was completely shut now.

"Better get Doc Hamilton to look at that cut on your scalp," Jim Overcast said. "Well, I might see you aroun' again, button."

Bill Dupree dismounted at the medico's office. Jim Overcast rode down to the livery-barn. Bill thought, "Hope the old man didn't get into too much trouble on account of me." It was hard to prophesy what a man like Rawson or Ganns would do to somebody who crossed them. And Overcast, by his own admission, had crossed them once. Now, he had crossed them again...to help Bill Dupree.

These thoughts were not pleasant to the game-warden. He was tying his bronc to the hitchrack when a feminine voice said, "Hello."

Bill turned, thoughts broken.

A girl stood beside the doctor's office. Bill looked at her dark, small face, and felt something move inside of him. Her skin was smooth, the color of coffee with a dash of cream, and her hair was jet-black. This darkness offset the red of her lips, open a little now to show white teeth.

"Why, Bill! What happened?"

Bill said, "I asked Rawson for a job. Ganns didn't like me. We had some trouble." He watched her closely to see what effect his words had. He found himself hoping they made an imprint on her.

"Why didn't he like you?"

"Because I'm a halfbreed, he said."

Her dark eyes touched his face, and the glance was warm. Her teeth came down and lightly touched her full bottom lip.

"Then Mr. Ganns won't like me, either. Come inside, Bill. Doc Hamilton is out in the country. But I can look at your wounds."

"I'd like that."

HE HAD said the wrong thing. The expression left her face, putting it dead-pan and lifeless; she looked a real Indian now. He walked ahead of her into the warm office with its potbellied stove red with Montana lignite coal. On his second day in Dodson he had seen Mary Red-Robin and he had asked questions.

The next night, he had taken her to the school-house dance. They had been the only two halfbreeds there. A local girl had turned Bill down for a dance, pleading a headache. She should have said, "I don't dance with 'breeds."

"Don't take it hard," Mary had said. "The main thing we can do,

Bill, is better ourselves, and set a good example for the rest of our kind."

Mary was working hard. She had gone to the Sister's School over in Mission Canyon in the Little Rockies. She had taken a nursing-course. And Doc Hamilton had been the only medico with gumption enough to hire a halfbreed as an office-nurse.

"Sit down, Bill."

Bill Dupree took the straight-backed chair. For the first time he saw how weak he really was. He had taken lots of punishment from Ganns. He put his head in his skinned hands and his forearms trembled.

"Sit quietly, Bill."

Mary Red-Robin's voice was soothing. Bill Dupree liked this girl immensely, although he had not told her that. She was a fighter and he hoped he was a fighter. He could have gone back on his reservation after school had finished. Many of his kind did that. They didn't have the guts to fight a hostile world. Or so it seemed to Bill Dupree.

They went back to their reservations. There they were with full-bloods and other halfbreeds; there they did not have to face the white-man's scorn. But Bill had not wanted that. He wanted to climb up, to make a name, to live a normal life.

Mary Red-Robin felt the same as he. He could tell that from her talk, small as it had been; he could see it in her proud walk, her desire to learn and learn and learn yet more. This thought, for some reason, was soothing. It quieted him and the tremble left his sore body.

Mary gave him a glass of something. He drank it and immediately felt better. She said, "I'll help you take off your coat, Bill."

He was stiff, the reaction of the fight. She helped him with his coat and she hung it on the hook. He watched her mix some solution in a pan. The smell of it was sharp, and he smiled.

"Don't give me anything that'll sting me."

"You sound like a little boy."

She knelt, face opposite his, and felt of his sore spots. She opened his eye with thumb and forefinger. Her scrutiny finished, she washed spots with the solution. It stung where the skin was broken. But Bill felt better afterwards.

"How about that cut on the side of my head?"

Mary looked at it carefully. Her fingers made explorations. "I don't think it needs any stitches, Bill. But of course, if you want, we can get Doctor Hamilton's opinion. I'm only a nurse."

"Your word's good with me."

She stepped back, hands on her hips, and she appraised him carefully. "You're a tough-looking halfbreed, Bill. That eye will be closed for a couple of days. But tomorrow morning you'll feel better."

"I hope so."

She smiled. He liked that slow, hesitant smile. He almost told her that, then checked his words.

"You should go to bed, Bill. Where do you sleep? Down in the hay in the livery-barn?"

"I got a hotel room." Bill felt a little awkward. Evidently she figured he was broke. Then he realized she probably thought he was a drifter on the bum. This thought was not pleasant. He wished he could tell her he was a government game-warden. But he dare not do that.

"You get to bed and get a good night's sleep."

4

AL GANNS lay on his back in the loose snow. Ed Rawson squatted and watched one of his men wash Ganns' bloody face with the snow. Ganns' eyes were closed. His upper lip was split and his right cheek swollen.

"Can you see?" Rawson asked.

Ganns opened his eyes. "One might swell shut. T'other oughta stay open. Go easy with that snow, Smoky." Ganns closed his eyes again.

"This snow'll keep swellin' down, Ganns."

Ed Rawson watched the man apply snow to Ganns' face. Ed Rawson was frowning, and his displeasure was apparent. He stood up, wiping snow from his pants, still watching Ganns' face.

"Man, you took a beatin', Ganns."

"I handed out plenty."

Derision rimmed Ed Rawson's voice. "But he handed you more'n you gave out to him. First time I've ever seen you whupped."

"I'm not whupped...yet."

Rawson was angry. For one thing, he boasted of rodding a tough outfit —now a halfbreed, of all persons, had whipped his top-man. This was a matter of personal pride. Then old Jim Overcast had thrown a gun on him. This was another horse of the same dark color.

"You meet that 'breed again, Ganns, an' he'll whup you again."

"You didn't look so good yourself," Ganns reminded.

Darkness ran across Rawson's dark face. He had hit Bill Dupree, and hit him from behind, and Jim Overcast had seen this. Overcast might tell everybody he met that Ed Rawson fought from behind. Rawson did not like that thought. He hadn't seen Overcast around. Had he seen the old man on the mule, he would not have hit Bill Dupree from behind.

Rawson walked over to where his skinners were working. He was absorbed in black thoughts; he watched them without seeing them. For his mind was far away, and when the mind is busy, the eyes do not take cognizance of what they look at. The smell of wool was in his nostrils, but he did not notice that either.

Ganns climbed out of the snow, shook himself like a dog, and ambled over, walking slowly. He stopped beside Ed Rawson. For a moment both men were silent. The man who had washed Ganns' face with snow went back to work with his team. Tug-chains made noises, a man said something, hoofs dug into snow as teams braced. A skinner sharpened his knife on the hone. The *swish* of it made a light sound against the icy stillness.

"Not much daylight left," Ganns said.

Rawson said, "Come here," and walked out of hearing of his men. Ganns followed, shuffling along, face swollen, face ugly. Rawson stopped and Ganns stopped and Ganns looked at his boss without speaking.

"Well?" Ganns finally asked.

Rawson said, "Maybe we picked on the wrong man, Ganns. It doesn't seem logical to me the gover'ment would send out a danged halfbreed as a game-warden. I don't savvy all I know about this."

Ganns scowled.

Rawson repeated, "Still don't seem logical. Seems to me the gover'ment would send out a white man."

"He followed that new trapper one night," Ganns pointed out. "That new gink you hired to trap upper Beaver Crick. This 'breed followed him out to your farm. Then he laid in the brush an' watched the new trapper."

Rawson nodded thoughtfully.

"That oughta be evidence enough he's damn' game-warden!"

"Still doesn't seem right."

"He follered him," Ganns maintained. "Them Injuns are becomin' big-men with 'the gover'ment, I hear."

Rawson kicked a clod with his

overshoe. Then he looked up, face still grooved by thought.

"Reckon you're right, Ganns. Too bad you couldn't've killed him. We would've too, if that ol' fool of a Jim Overcast hadn't ambled in on his mule. We could've cut a hole in the ice, shoved that halfbreed through it, an' what'd been left of him would have gone down-stream come the break-up in the spring. But Overcast busted it all up, right after we had the luck of that 'breed ridin' into our camp."

Ganns said, "I'll get a rifle lined on him. I tried to get sights on him when he trailed that trapper on Beaver Crick. Night too dark, though; when I shoot I aim to kill. But there'll be a time."

"This Overcast fella. I don't savvy him."

"I don't foller you, Ed."

Rawson shrugged. "Just a thought... But we know there's a gover'ment game-warden out in this locality. Our inside dope from St. Louis told us that. Too bad we couldn't find out his name."

"The boys in St. Louie didn't know his name, huh?"

Ed Rawson continued. The men in St. Louis only figured a government game-warden would be sent out. A government inspector had stumbled across one of the poached beaver-hides.

"Then they ain't sure a game-warden's even out here, eh? An' how could they tell where a hide—a beaver-hide—come from, anyway?"

Rawson said that was not hard. The quality, color, and length of the furs differed from locality to locality. "Them boys are smart, Ganns. They know furs like we know beaver-runs around here. No, that Injun must be the man. That means he's got to go under the ice. But it sure seems odd that Jim Overcast happened in at that moment."

GANNS SHRUGGED. His mental capacity was limited to either extreme hate or extreme anger. Just now both of these were directed toward Bill Dupree. Ganns let Rawson

do the heavy thinking. His cut was one-third, with the other third going to the trapper who spotted the beaver-dens, and with Rawson taking a third. Ganns was content with that cut. Both he and Rawson made good money. The trapper made enough money, too; therefore, he kept quiet.

"We got a good set-up here," Rawson said. "We gotta watch this 'breed, an' if he crosses us, we get rid of him."

"Wonder if the federal men know how we smuggle these beaver pelts into St. Louie, Ed?"

Rawson shook his head. "Don't reckon they do. Our last two shipments went through okay. We've had a lot of luck, though. This blizzard killed off a lot of woolies, an' we need lots of sheep pelts in our business."

Ganns went back to work skinning sheep. Rawson watched his crew a while, glanced at the sky, then told Ganns he was riding into Dodson. "Knock off in a half-hour an' haul the pelts in an' salt them tonight."

"Big chore, this late."

"Salt them come mornin', then."

Ed Rawson untied his saddle-horse from the clump of willows and mounted and rode toward Dodson.

He did not ride fast. He had many thoughts, and some were not pleasant; he faced them and looked for a solution.

This game was tightening up. There was more danger in it now, and he did not like danger, for he was sensible. For a while he and Ganns had worked it without danger. It had been easy.

Ganns had ridden in one summer evening. "Sure lots of beaver in the river an' in Beaver Crick, Ed. I seen some that looked like small dogs, they was that big. They should be easy to catch."

"Not with traps, Ganns. A federal man would move in pronto. Some local citizen would spot a trap an' report it right off."

"Remember that fellow in Wyomin'? Mind how he got beaver?"

Ed Rawson had scowled, suddenly thoughtful. "We need some dogs, Ganns. Short-legged dogs, terrier an' bulldog, an' fighters. That fellow took beaver out danged fast, if I remember right. I'll try to make connections for gettin' rid of the hides. You got a good idea, friend."

"We need trappers to spot holes. Me, I don't know much about beaver. One or two trappers—cut them in—"

They had gotten their dogs. Shipped them into a town across country, down on another railroad. They had not shipped the dogs into Dodson. They wanted no questions asked.

They had got one trapper. But he had made enough dinero and pulled out, boots getting cold. But he had sent up an old partner of his. This was the man Bill Dupree had trailed to Rawson's farm and then to upper Beaver Creek.

Rawson was sure Bill Dupree was a government game-warden. Otherwise Dupree would not have trailed out the trapper. But Dupree would not last long...if they got him in the right locality.

Brush. Powdersmoke puffing from it. And Bill Dupree going from bronc. A hole in the ice in Milk River. Dupree's body sliding into it. The intense cold freezing over the ice...

Rawson thought of that, face merciless. Fifty bucks for a prime beaver hide, and already they had taken out over a hundred. And with upper Beaver Creek yet to be cleaned, another hundred easily. Two hundred hides. Ten thousand bucks. Divided three ways... Still a nice gob of foldin' money.

Yes, Dupree would have to go.

Now that his mind was made up, Rawson felt better. He lifted the pony to a lope. Dusk was coming in, inching across the snow. The night would be very cold. Already the thermometer had dropped since he had left the skinning-camp.

He would hang around Dodson, where he could watch Bill Dupree. Maybe he could get the game-warden in a fight and kill him fair and even. But Ed Rawson did not like that thought. He had seen Dupree fight with his fists, and Dupree was lightning fast. And he was probably just as fast with a six-shooter.

HE REACHED Dodson with darkness already thick. First he rode to the depot, where he inquired about a car to ship out the sheep pelts. The operator told him a car was already on the siding.

"Done heard this 'breed Dupree whupped Al Ganns, Ed?"

"News travels fast, operator."

"Well, Dupree went to Doc Hamilton's office, but Doc was out, so this 'breed nurse of Doc's works on him. Then Doc comes in an' he spreads it aroun' town. Doc talks a lot when he nurses a bottle."

"Makes no difference no how," Rawson said. "People'd find out anyway. But it was a good fight. They was about even, I'd say."

Rawson rode down Dodson's main street, wondering if Bill Dupree would report the incident to the sheriff. He dismounted in front of the sheriff's office. That worthy was just in the act of locking his door for the night.

"Hear about the fight, sheriff?"

"You mean Dupree an' Ganns?"

"That's what I mean."

The sheriff pocketed the key. He was a big man, blunt and far from stupid. "Must've been quite a tussle. I was up to the hotel to talk with Dupree. He sure looked like he hadn't won."

"He whipped Ganns."

"Don't seem logical."

Rawson nodded. "Dang fools got in a fight over nothin'. Truth is, sheriff, Ganns has been drinkin' a little too much. An' when Ganns drinks he wants to fight. But I guess you know that. Dupree aim to file a complaint against my man?"

"He didn't mention it. I brought it up and he said no."

"I sure won't file none."

The sheriff nodded, pulled up his sheepskin collar, and went toward home, overshoes crackling on the cold snow. Rawson blew and his breath turned to cold vapor immediately. He put his bronc in the livery-barn and went to Dodson's only saloon, the *Broken Bit*. The stove was red-hot but it had a hard time keeping the place anywhere warm.

Three pensioneers played cards, and Rawson gave them a short look. Two Bar S cowboys drank at the bar, idling over their drinks. They gave him a glance, then resumed their low conversation. Rawson read rightly their snub and felt anger. The cowmen and the cowboys held no friendship for him and his crew.

But with this anger was a strange feeling of derision. He had outsmarted the Bar S and the Box 7. And he had done it legally. When this was over, he'd run cattle on Milk River, and to hell with the Box 7 and Bar S!

He had figured everything out... and it was working his way. The money he made on beaver would go into cattle come spring. Cattle, and more purchases from the farmers. Cows were cheap now. He'd stock his range and get good stock. He already had five hundred head of Hereford cows.

He tossed off a drink he did not need, and went outside. He met Mary Red-Robin and he asked, "And how's your patient?"

"I have a number of patients, Mr. Rawson. Which one do you mean?"

He felt anger, for her voice was as cold as night. But he checked it sternly, making his voice level.

"Bill Dupree."

"Oh, the *halfbreed*, huh?" She was colder now. "He'll be all right in a few days. And by the way, how is your man?"

"He's too tough to see a doc!"

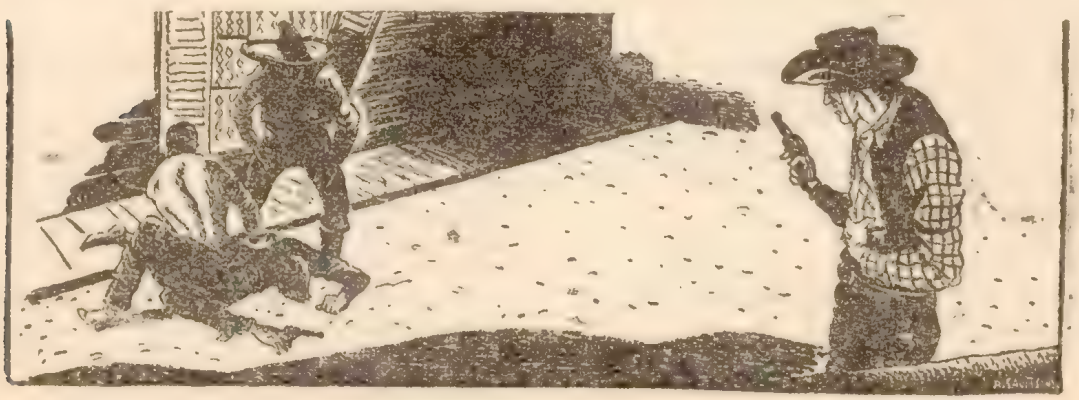
Rawson caught himself. He had hissed the words.

5

JIM OVERCAST met Mary Red-Robin as she came into the hotel's dining-room. "You'd do me a favor, Miss Mary, if you had mornin' chuck with me."

Mary had doctored him for a sore thumb, and she had learned to know him fairly well. "Would you eat with a half-breed, Mr. Overcast?"

"Did you have to say that?"



She caught herself. She did not want to admit it, but she had been worried about the cut on Bill Dupree's scalp. She had just tried Bill's door, but it had been locked, so she had gone down for breakfast.

"I'm sorry, sir."

"That's better," the old man said. "And how is that patient of yours this cold mornin'?"

"He's still asleep."

Old Jim Overcast allowed that sleep was a good remedy. God was good enough to put out the sun so a man could sleep in the dark. "But some danged fool men don't reckon God's got much brains. They get drunk an' carouse in the dark an' bunk up in the daylight."

But Mary Red-Robin was in no mood for philosophy. Jim Overcast ate a hearty breakfast—spuds, ham, and coffee—but Mary only had coffee and toast. Overcast sighed.

"No wonder I'm losin' my girlish figure. You eat like a robin."

Ed Rawson came in. He nodded at Mary but apparently didn't see Jim Overcast. This brought a smile to the old man's unshaven mouth. He remarked he had seen horses that were blind in spots.

"Seen broncs that had blind-spots in their eyes. Couldn't see certain things at all. Reckon our friend over there must have the same affliction."

"Not so loud," Mary whispered. "No bar-room brawl with me around."

Old Jim Overcast smiled. After eating he and Mary went up to Bill Dupree's room. They got Bill to the door after some hard knocking.

"You got plugs in your ears?" Overcast demanded.

Bill sat on the chair and looked at himself in the mirror. His face was distorted. He moved closer; his face danced and wavered. He pushed back and his image made a little sense.

"I love myself. I'm real purty."

Mary studied him closely. "You heal fast, mister. But that eye sure is black."

"I'll betcha I know where there's a blacker one."

Jim Overcast laughed. "Cowpuncher saw Al Ganns this mornin' early. Ganns was skinnin' out there. Cowpuncher said Ganns could hardly see. Reminded him of a bee-stung ol' bear."

"I should laugh," Bill said. "But if I did, it would hurt my mouth. Wonder if I kin still chew an' eat."

"You can," Mary said. "Well, I have to get to the office. Drop in this morning, Bill, and let me wash you up a little."

Bill promised.

"Wish I had a purty woman to watch over me," Overcast said.

Mary's steps retreated down the hall. Outside the intense cold bit at the building. It gnawed and made crackles. Finally Jim Overcast stood up.

"Well, gotta head out for my homestead."

Bill Dupree buttoned his shirt. Overcast seemed reluctant to leave. The old man stood in the doorway, gnarled hand on the knob. He was short and wiry and he watched Bill.

Bill looked at him.

Overcast said, "Be seein' you," and jammed on his muskrat cap. He went down the hall, overshoes shuffling on the worn carpet. Bill Dupree heard him descend the stairs into the lobby. He kept remembering that look in the old man's faded eyes. Why had Overcast looked at him that way?

Or was he just imagining things? Maybe his face was so homely, so swollen, it sort of fascinated Overcast? Well, his face would have looked worse, if Overcast hadn't stopped that fight.

THE THOUGHT of the fight brought his mind back to Al Ganns and Ed Rawson. After sleeping on it a night, Bill Dupree was more convinced than ever that the pair had wanted to kill him. He had unwittingly ridden into their trap, for he had thought nobody knew his identity here on Milk River range. While he wasn't sure the pair was suspicious of him, he had his own reasons for thinking they were.

Anyway, from here out, he'd treat them as if they knew his identity, whether he was wrong or not in this assumption. Time would tell whether they knew he was a game-warden.

He went to the dining-room and ate a good breakfast, for he was hungrier than he had thought. Doc Hamilton was in his office and he gave Bill's face an inspection, spending some time looking at the scalp wound.

Mary asked, "Does it need stitches, doctor?"

Bill hoped it didn't. He had stood enough pain the last two days. He was relieved when Doc Hamilton shook his head.

"He must have a head made out of rock," the medico said.

Bill loafed that forenoon. Ed Rawson left Dodson about noon, heading toward the sheep-skinning camp. There was no wind but the mercury stood at twenty-some below zero. Bill ate again and got his bronc and rode west. Had anybody seen him leave town, they'd've thought he was heading out to the Bar S looking for a job, for he turned north after crossing the snow-covered thick ice of Milk River. But once in the high buckbrush and willows, he swung back south again, re-crossing the river at Dobbins' Crossing.

Once he drew rein, there among some snow-covered sandstones in the rimrock, and looked at the valley below. Far to the north smoke curled lazily upward from the chimneys of the Bar S outfit. South smoke trickled against the sky from the stoves of the Box 7. The log cabins of the farmers—the few left—were dark spots against the snow.

He picked out Rawson's spread, there against the river. A man was feeding Rawson's cattle on the feed-lot. He pitched hay out of a hay-rack and the cows followed the moving vehicle, grabbing hay as it hit the snow. His glasses showed the scene clearly.

He searched his back-trail, but found nobody on it. Vigilance was with him, a stern part of him. He was in danger every minute he was on this range. Rawson and Ganns had proved that yesterday at the sheep-skinning camp.

He came in from behind the Rawson spread. A half-mile back of the ranch, he tied his bronc in the brush, hiding the animal. He went the rest of the way on foot.

He wondered if Rawson had any dogs. If a dog caught his scent and came out barking— He halted in the brush, looking at the scattered buildings in front of him. A log house, log barn, another log building. This latter was probably the bunkhouse for the Rawson men.

Bill caught a sudden odor—almost nauseating. He judged it as the odor of the sheep-hides, piled a short distance beyond the house. The wind shifted, and he lost the ugly smell.

He looked for men, saw none.

By rights, Rawson men would be out skinning sheep. But there might be a man on the ranch. Bill saw the open door of a shed and he went up to the building, and he went inside.

Here it was rather dark, for the winter day was short here under the Canadian Line. He was looking for traps or any other evidence that would tie Rawson into this. His plan was to mark some traps. Then, if these same traps were caught in beaver-runs, he could identify them as belonging to Rawson's outfit. And he would have the goods on Rawson.

He had done that before on another job. Marked traps, found them in sets, proved they belonged to a poacher. He had a chisel, sharp and small; with this, he would scratch the traps a little, making a certain design under a spring, for beaver traps had two springs. This design would be small and nobody would notice it while setting the trap.

He was in the tool-house. He got the smell of steel and rust, but he found no traps hanging on the wall. He looked out, saw nobody, and walked openly into the barn.

Standing in the darkness of the barn's interior, he looked for a moment at the house, wondering if anybody had seen him. He was jumpy and uncertain. But if there

was anybody on this homestead, he was either inside the house asleep, or anyway he kept out of sight.

Horses munched hay from mangers. He caught the close smell of horses and manure, and he looked the barn over very carefully, but found no traps hanging from the wall, the place most trappers keep their traps.

He looked up. There was a haymow overhead. He went up the ladder. Suddenly he stopped, breath tightening. A man had entered the barn below him. Bill Dupree lay on his belly and looked through a crack down into the barn below.

And what he saw made a hardness curl his lips. He could hardly believe his eyes. A man stood down there in that uncertain light, and that man was Jim Overcast. And that didn't make sense!

Jim Overcast...out at Rawson's spread. And yesterday this same Overcast had crossed Rawson to help one Bill Dupree. Bill watched...and wondered. Overcast gave the barn a close scrutiny. He seemed to be searching for somebody. Was he looking for one Bill Dupree?

Maybe the oldster had trailed Bill out of Dodson? Bill had watched his back-trail, though; there'd been nobody on it. And why would he trail him? This was a riddle that Bill could not answer.

OVERCAST walked twice around the barn, patted a bronc on the rump, then left by the rear door. Bill waited for about twenty minutes, but the old man did not return. Then the game-warden went down the ladder into the barn. He looked through every building on the Rawson spread and finally came to the house. By the time he got to a window, a lamp had been lit inside.

He couldn't see through the window. Frost had covered it and made vision impossible. The light of the kerosene lamp could barely penetrate the frosty glass.

He listened.

He heard a man move. He heard what sounded like a stove-lid lifted, then allowed to fall into place. A spoon made noises against a bowl. He realized the cook was making supper for the Rawson crew, which should come in soon.

Bill thought, "I'll have to get out."

His long ride had accomplished nothing. Evidently the cook was the only Rawson man on the farm, and the cook had evidently slept the wintery afternoon away. Cooks many times slept in the afternoons, for they got up so early in the morning.

Bill pulled back. His feet were cold despite woolen socks and overshoes, and his cheekbones were white. He decided to go back to Dodson. The only thing he could do was to scout the creeks for traps. Either that or trail Rawson and have the man give himself away...if he were the guilty man.

Darkness was almost here. But he halted at the edge of a building, a strange odor coming to him. It was the smell of dogs in close quarters. It seemed to come from a lean-to built onto the barn.

He went to it. The door was unlocked. He slid inside into darkness; he heard the low rumble of a dog's growl. That stopped him and he stood silent, wishing his eyes would fit themselves to this gloom.

They finally did. Ahead of him was a wooden fence, running across one end of the small building, and beyond this fence, chained to the wall, were about six dogs, who watched him in silence. And that in itself was odd. Usually dogs barked at a stranger.

Bill lit a match.

The yellow light showed the eyes of the dogs. They were curs—odd-looking dogs. Something like daschunds, only mongrel breeds. The first thing that struck Bill was their short legs.

Their legs were very short. Their barrels were heavy and they seemed out of proportion to the stubby legs. One opened his mouth and Bill expected to hear him bark. He went

through the motions, but no sounds came. Another went through the motion of whining. Still, no sound.

The game-warden understood. These dogs had no sound-boxes in their throats. They had been silenced by some fiendish operation. They stared at him, eyes ghoulish in the light of the match, and one wagged his tail.

The match went out. Bill Dupree stood silent, trying to think. He tried to make sense out of this. But it had as much meaning as had the entrance of old Jim Overcast in that barn.

Neitner made sense.

Suddenly, he heard sounds, and a man asked, "Cook, chuck ready?"

THE SOUNDS came from the house. Hurriedly the game-warden slid out of the lean-to. Darkness was thick now, the lamplight yellow from the house. Rawson and his men had returned. Men were unhooking teams from the bob-sleds, their overshoes cracking the snow in the stillness.

Bill debated. He wished it were darker. He had stayed too long on this spread. Now, he had to get to the brush, but it was still light enough to see a man move— He went ahead, bent over.

Rawson and his men were all of fifty yards away. Bill was almost in the brush when he heard Ganns holler, "What's that over there? It's movin'—"

A gun spat flame. A loud ugly report. Bill heard the high whine of a bullet. He waited no longer; he hit the brush. He went flat, flying there, watching the men. Ganns had shot. He could barely make out the ape-like man as he stood there, gun in hand.

"Was that a man?" Ganns demanded.

A man said, "Looked to me like a deer. One comes down to raid the haystack now and then. A man would've made some noise runin' through that brush. A deer wouldn't."

Bill Dupree was glad he had used his head and had hit the snow, the minute the brush had hidden him. This man was right.

"Cook, you seen anybody aroun' today?" Bill recognized Ed Rawson's voice.

"Nobody been aroun' here, Ed."

Rawson said, "Must've been a deer then. No use goin' over there lookin' for tracks. We've all walked across that strip until the snow is packed. Unload them sheep-pelts an' then go in an' grab chuck."

Bill made out Rawson's form coming toward him. He decided to beat a quick and sensible retreat. Suddenly he stopped, hidden by thick brush. A man was coming toward his hiding place, coming on the run.

He was very short, this man. Bill realized he could be nobody else but Jim Overcast. And his assumption proved correct. Overcast trotted by him, and yonder Ed Rawson made bear-like noises in the brush. Then the night held the small man, hiding him.

Bill knew that Rawson was checking to make sure whether Ganns had shot at a man or a deer. But he figured the man would make little if no headway—the night was too dark. He knew why Rawson was in the brush, but he didn't know why Overcast was there.

A devilish thought pulled at Bill's brain, drawing a smile to his swollen lips. He could sneak in and knock Rawson cold, using his six-shooter barrel as a billy-club. That would in some measure repay Rawson for the hard blow to Bill's jaw, after Bill had fairly whipped Al Ganns.

But there was danger in it. If he bungled the job— The game-warden shoved the tempting thought back, and faced stern reality. He went to his horse, moving silently, and he rode into the night, leaving the Rawson spread behind.

The days ride had accomplished exactly nothing. Or had he learned something? He wasn't sure....

FIRST, there was old Jim Overcast. Overcast was a riddle. Bill thought long, and he thought hard—but where did Overcast fit into this?

Was he working for Rawson? No, that didn't jibe into the rest of this setup. If Overcast was on Rawson's payroll, Overcast would not have jumped Rawson yesterday, and thereby saved Bill from getting a beating.

Bill Dupree decided the old man would stand watching. He made a mental note to that effect, then let his thoughts dwell on the dogs he had seen. Dogs without barks or whines... What did Rawson— Why did Rawson keep the dogs? The eerieness of the dogs made Bill's thoughts serious.

There were lots of angles here he did not understand. Well, he had failed on this ride—he had not even found a beaver-trap to scratch for identification. Odd, no beaver-traps around. Wasn't a ranch in the country that didn't have a few number 3 or 4 traps hanging around on some peg. For these same sized traps were also used for trapping coyotes and bobcats and lynx.

There seemed only one thing to do, and Bill Dupree did not like to follow that plan through. He was only human and this was bitterly cold weather. He too liked to sit around a hot stove on cold days and he liked warm blankets on cold nights. And this plan called for some cold days and colder nights.

But it was the only thing left.

He would head out of Dodson and make camps in the wilderness and watch Rawson and his men. This plan held danger, for Rawson was openly suspicious, and many a game-warden had ridden into the hills... to never return. But Bill realized that was the only thing left to do.

He'd leave Dodson, come morning. Then he remembered Mary Red-Robin. Well, he'd best keep level-headed; a woman had no place in this. After it was over he could see Mary...

After this was over, and if he were still living, he'd be transferred to another case and nobody knew where he would go. But maybe Mary would go with him? He checked his thoughts with, "Bill Dupree, you're takin' this mighty serious." And this made him smile.

Suddenly, he pulled in. He had the ears of an Indian, and somewhere, above the rustle of his own gear, above the sounds made by his own horse, he had heard another rider behind him. He put his horse in a bunch of buckbrush and waited.

The man came at a lope. This told Bill Dupree the man was not trailing him. Had he been trailing, he would have come cautiously. The man loped by, and he was small in saddle, body hunched against the movements of his bronc. He was seen but a second, then the night claimed him.

"Jim Overcast," Bill thought. "Overcast, again."

The game-warden heard the sounds of Overcast's bronc run out into the night and distance. The old man was riding toward Dodson. By this time, Bill Dupree had given up trying to solve Overcast's movements. He swung onto the trail.

When he came into the Dodson livery-barn, Overcast's bronc was unsaddled, tied in a stall. While Bill peeled leather from his own cayuse he gave Overcast's horse a quick glance. The horse was breathing heavily.

"Been ridden hard," Bill told the stable-man. He hung his kak by one stirrup against the pillar. "Grain my cayuse good and give him plenty of hay. I leave this burg tomorrow."

"No work around here, huh?"

"No work," Bill assured.

He went down-town, the inner man demanding chuck. When he passed the saloon, old Jim Overcast came out.

"Time for chuck, son. You et yet?"

"Headin' for the nosebag now," Bill assured.

They went to the hotel together, Bill wondering about Jim Overcast, and also wondering if Overcast had any suspicious thought about him. There were lots of things, and man, that didn't jibe on this snow-covered range.

"Been outa town this afternoon, ain't you? Overcast asked.

Bill debated before answering. Then he told the old man he had

ridden out to the Bar S looking for a job feeding hay to cattle. He watched Overcast from the corner of one eye, and saw the man's ready nod.

"Any luck, Bill?"

"No luck. Come mornin' I have to pull out. A man can't live on air an' water, you know."

"You might find somethin' down on the Missouri. Them sheep-outfits down there feed lots of hay an' one of them might need a hay-pitcher, if a man can stand the smell of them woolies."

"You been in town all day?" Bill asked.

Overcast looked at him sharply. Bill pretended he had not noticed the scrutiny. He watched Mary Red-Robin come into the dining-room.

Overcast said, "Been aroun' town all day. But tonight have to head for home to milk my cow. Let's get this gal to eat with us, Bill?"

"Good idea."

6

THE FIELD-GLASSES brought distant objects very close, for they were high-powered. They swept across the Rawson crew, cleaning up the last few pelts of the sheep-skinning job, and settled on Ed Rawson.

Rawson was a half-mile away, down there in that gully, but the glasses made him fairly clear. He was sharpening a knife, honing it with a hand-stone. The knife sharp, he went over to a dead sheep, started to skin.

Bill Dupree watched for a while, then lowered his glasses. The half-breed game-warden lay on his belly up there on the rimrock overlooking Milk River valley. Up here the wind seemed to blow continuously. It lifted snow and whipped it across a boulder and snow-particles stung Bill.

Despite his mittens, Bill's hands were cold. Cold was a living thing that was always with him. Two days before, he had left Dodson, dropping into Doc Hamilton's office to see Mary Red-Robin before he left town.

"Well, I'm leavin' this mornin', Mary."

"Why, Bill!" Her dark eyes had searched his face. "You didn't mention that last night when you and I and Mr. Overcast had supper together. This is sudden, isn't it?"

They were alone in the office. Doc Hamilton had not yet come from his hotel-room. The heater was making a cheery glow of heat and the room was warm and comfortable. And outside the mercury stood at thirty-two below.

"I wanted to tell you...alone," Bill said.

There it was, spoken, and between them. And Mary was smiling, looking out the window, not meeting his eyes. And he was going ahead, putting his arms around her, and she still did not meet his gaze.

"Mary..."

"Yes...Bill."

"Mary, I'll be back."

She kissed him suddenly. Her lips were warm, possessive, almost hard. "You'd better come back, you no-good half-breed. You'd better get a job and make some money so we can be married in the spring."

"Wheew..." Bill had grinned happily. "Am I glad to hear that."

And so, because he was young, because he was in love, Game Warden Bill Dupree, out on a rough, dangerous job, had ridden out of Dodson, not noticing the cold one bit, thinking only of a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl. And Game Warden Bill Dupree said to the wind, "I'll be back, Mary ...but it'll be before spring, you can believe that, for sure."

Hell, he could whip Rawson and Ganns and the whole Rawson crew, and he could use old Jim Overcast as a club, swinging the old bucko by his ankles, and he could knock down the whole damned Rawson bunch.

He could whip an elephant with his bare hands!

The first night had dulled his ardor somewhat. He'd made camp back in the rimrock, and he'd used a buffalo-robe and a blanket for cov-

ers. He'd unrolled his bedding back under the overthrust of a rocky ledge and when morning had come he had been snowed under.

And he'd been very, very cold.

He had oats for his bronc, having bought a sack in town, and he fed the horse from a tin pail he had also brought along. He made a small fire and melted snow-water, using the tin-pail as a kettle, and he'd warmed a can of beans. Now he'd lived on beans for two days.

And in those two days, he had never warmed up. He was always cold. Cold at night, cold at day. Well, maybe when he'd worked a few years for the government, they'd give him an inside desk-job. But he knew he wouldn't like that. That was only wishful thinking.

Now Rawson was finishing skinning the dead woolies. Somewhere these woolies fitted into this beaver-trapping. But where? Bill shrugged, amused by this thought, seeing no connection in it. He got his bronc and rode west, heading for Beaver Creek.

He spent the afternoon there, watching the Rawson trapper working the creek. From the open rifles, where the water moved too fast to freeze, he saw the man take a mink from a trap. The fellow also caught quite a few muskrats and weasels. But evidently he had no beaver sets out. Occasionally Bill saw him stop, look at the creek-bank, like he was appraising a beaver den.

But he chopped no ice, he took no beaver-traps out of the creek. Plainly he was on the up-and-up and doing only legitimate trapping.

BILL DUPREE knew all the angles in trapping beavers. He had, in fact, gone to game-warden school for two weeks, and had taken a course on the beaver and his habits.

He knew a beaver had two entrances to his den, which he dug back in the bank of a street. One entrance was level with the water. This he used in the summer-time. The other entrance was below the water-line. This the beaver and his family used in the winter when the upper entrance was closed due to ice.

To insure enough water, the beavers built dams of logs, mud and gravel. These dams allowed some water to pass by but raised the water level high enough for the beavers to swim and work on timber, floating it down to the dam for reinforcements. And he noticed Beaver Creek had only one big dam.

This was one of the biggest beaver dams he had ever seen. The beavers had backed up water for at least one-half a mile. At the dam, the water, so Bill figured, would be at least twenty-feet deep.

Th size of the dam meant beaver were plentiful here, for it would take many beavers to accomplish such an engineering feat. And the size of some of the logs cemented by mud into the dam also told Bill another thing: there were some big beaver here, for it would take big beaver to handle logs that size.

He had scouted this creek, but had found no beaver sets. He figured this section had not been trapped for many, many years. And, if he had his way, nobody was going to trap it now.

He watched the trapper until the man had run his trap-line and returned to his cabin. Bill Dupree then rode back to his rimrock camp. By this time dusk was thick but he could still make out the Rawson skinners, who were packing to return to the home-spread.

They still had a few sheep to take pelts from. Bill figured they had about half-a-day of skinning left.

The Rawson crew went toward home, sled-runners creaking, the sound cold and dismal to Bill. He looked toward Dodson. He could not see the town, for the hills hid it. And a great loneliness came into him; he had another cold night to spend, here in these bleak igneous hills swept clean of snow by the angry wind.

But he had a job to do. He had been lucky—indeed, very lucky—to get this game-warden job. He was the

only half-breed the government had hired. This thought was warm and held great promise.

Besides, Al Ganns had fought him, and Ed Rawson had slugged him from behind. That puts this on a personal affair. Ganns had fought somewhat fairly, but Rawson had used foul methods.

Rawson would pay for that. If he were not tangled in this beaver-poaching, if Rawson didn't pay that way, then Rawson would have a fight on his hands, before Bill Dupree left this Dodson country for a new job. Bill was sure of that. He'd call Rawson and whip him if he could.

But Rawson and Ganns *had to* be the beaver poachers. He had checked and double-checked every man, woman and youth on this range—suspicion could point to nobody but Rawson.

But what about Jim Overcast?

Bill let his thoughts dwell on the pint-sized oldster. Then he eliminated Overcast as a suspect. For one thing, the man hadn't been here long enough—beaver skins were going into the St. Louis market before Overcast had moved into this Dodson country. But speak of the devil—

Bill let his glasses rest on the rider. First, he made out the animal as a mule, and then he recognized old Jim Overcast. Overcast was about two miles away and he was coming from the direction of Beaver Creek. He was riding toward Dodson. Bill could barely make out the man's identity due to the encroaching darkness.

He was sure of one thing: Jim Overcast was not coming in from his homestead. The homestead was across the valley. Evidently Overcast had been out along Beaver Creek, too.

And why?

Bill shook his head, plainly puzzled. Maybe Overcast was working with that Beaver Creek trapper—No, that didn't make sense. The man had gone to Rawson, and Rawson had grub-staked him. But maybe his allegiance broke at this point with Ed Rawson?

Bill spent another cold night, miserable under the buffalo-robe and blanket. Dawn came at last and he cooked some more beans. The clouds were low, the wind sharp and fierce; the day was miserable. And it reflected against the half-breed's nature, drawing a darkness across him.

Rawson and his men came, and they finished their skinning by noon. Now nothing was left of the herd but the naked carcasses, frozen and stiff, waiting for the wolves and coyotes to come. Bill watched the bob-sleds go into the distance. He decided to break camp and move closer to watch Rawson's spread.

By two o'clock the blizzard was howling. The snow grew so thick at times that Bill could not see Rawson's farm below him. He hunkered in the rimrock, a small fire built in the protection of a boulder, and tried to warm his hands. His bronc stood with his rump against the wind. This was hell on man and horse, Bill decided. But there was no other course.

He had to keep watching Rawson.

This made a sense of rising futility inside him. He wanted to carry this out, work it out, go ahead, work on his own initiative. But such work had proven useless. It had netted only long cold rides and no information. He had to play a waiting-game. He had no other choice.

THAT NIGHT passed, as all nights must. By this time the swelling had left his face. The cut in his scalp had almost healed. His face felt normal and, had he been warm, it would have been a good world.

But it was intensely cold, and therefore the world was not good—the only bright spot was Mary Red-Robin.

Occasionally a man stirred at the farm below. A few salted hides, but the weather was too cold for this, and most of the Rawson crew stayed inside the house, and Bill envied them.

Noon came, and the wind fell back a little. Because it lost force, it held less snow, and visibility was better. He saw Rawson and Ganns come out of the house. They went to the lean-to beside the barn.

Bill Dupree hunkered, muscles suddenly tight, and watched through his glasses. Rawson went into the lean-to but Ganns waited outside. Soon Rawson and the dogs came out. The dogs, glad to be liberated, ran in wide circles, silent and without barks.

Bill watched. Rawson let the dogs run, then called them in, his voice coming up to Bill. They penned the dogs again and walked toward the house.

They were talking, but the distance was too far. Bill let tension run out of him. He couldn't understand why—for the dogs. Surely, somewhere, they fitted into this. He was sure nobody knew about the dogs except the Rawson crew and himself. Rawson had the dogs silenced for a definite purpose. He kept them penned and hidden also for a definite reason.

Bill searched his mind, looking for some clue pointing to the usefulness of these silenced dogs, but again he found nothing. He came down with darkness, moving closer to the farm. He hid in the haymow.

Here the wind did not get to him. And the hay held a little warmth. He was almost asleep when he heard voices and movements below him. He looked down a knot-hole and saw clearly the scene below, there in the orange-colored light of the lantern.

Rawson and Ganns were saddling horses, and each man had a shovel and pick. Rawson tightened his cinch and said, "Cold night, Ganns."

"But it'll be a good night...for us," Ganns said.

Rawson laughed a little. The sound made small echoes in the cold barn. Rawson tied his latigo tight. "Every night is a good night when we head out on a job like this. Reckon this'll be the last raid, 'cause them varmints are thinnin' out, all except on Beaver Crick."

Bill noticed the dogs were also in the barn. One must have caught his scent, for he looked up at the haymow, mouth trying to form growls. Al Ganns caught the dog's stance.

"What's he lookin' up fer, Rawson?"

"Prob'ly so glad to be outa that pen, he don't know what he's doin'. But he'll get a work-out tonight, believe you me. This moonlight sure is one point in our favor. So danged light out a man can almost read, what with the reflection of this moon on the snow."

"Wonder if that 'breed left the country, Ed?"

Rawson said, "I dunno."

"I don't think he did, Ed. Me, I figger that Injun was that game-warden, sure as hell. Still, don't seem logical the gover'ment would hire a 'breed, does it?"

"Never tell about the gover'ment. They do all the crazy things possible." They were in saddles now, the dogs leaping soundlessly around them. "We'll have a guard out. Come on, Al!"

They rode outside, leaving the lighted lamp in the barn. Bill went hurriedly down the haymow ladder, remembering the pair had taken shovels and picks. Yes, and they had packed gunny-sacks, tied to their saddles.

Now what was this, anyway?

He darted across the barn, came to the door. Already the pair was out of sight. Moonlight lay like golden lamplight across the snow, giving the brush a heavy darkness.

Yonder was the bunkhouse, a light in it. No lamp lit in the house.... This was the first real clue he had gotten. This knowledge was warm in him despite the intense cold.

The game-warden hurried through the brush, heading for his bronc tied back in the buckbrush along the rim-rock. He was going through some wild rosebushes, the thorns dragging against him, when suddenly he stopped.

At first, he thought it was a deer, inching down toward the haystacks

for a night of stolen hay. Then he saw the figure was a man. A man, moving along a path—and that man was Jim Overcast...

7

BILL DUPREE watched, a great patience in him. Overcast did not see him, for the rosebushes hid him, and gaunt skeletons of leafless cottonwood trees and box-elder trees spread dark shadows across the brush. And Bill Dupree watched with the patience of an Indian.

Overcast carried a rifle, and when he went down the trail, Bill swung in behind him. This man was a riddle, the wind across trees, the echo in the gully.... The short man traveled at a dog-trot, heading back into the hills. Bill followed him at least a quarter-mile.

At this point, Jim Overcast turned into the brush, and Bill pulled back into hiding, too, some fifty feet behind the old farmer. Bill waited, hearing Overcast move in the brush, and he heard Overcast's low voice. Soon the short man came out astraddle his mule, still carrying his rifle. The fact he carried his rifle instead of putting it into his saddle-holster, registered on Bill.

Evidently Jim Overcast kept the Winchester unsheathed because he figured he might be called upon suddenly to use it?

The mule and rider was a shadow, heading at a lope, and then they were gone, lost in that tanglement of brush, lost against the night and its moonlight. Bill listened but the hoofsounds were dead, too, as the snow absorbed them.

A thousand ideas, some utterly wild and fantastic, ran across Bill Dupree's mind. Maybe old Jim Overcast was a petty thief? Maybe he had seen Al Ganns and Ed Rawson leave, and with them gone he aimed to do some thievery against them? But that didn't make much sense, either.

Only one thing made sense... Overcast was watching Rawson and Ganns, and Overcast was watching him, Bill Dupree. Maybe Rawson and Ganns were not poaching beaver—Maybe Overcast was the head of a gang that hid back in the hills and was working the country of its beaver?

But if such were the case, why would he watch Rawson and Ganns?

Bill decided his mental conjectures would never receive logical answers, not at this turn of the game... He remembered Rawson saying, "...them varmints are thinnin' out, all except on Beaver Crick." That meant, as plain as he was a foot high, that Rawson and Ganns were getting beaver hides. And where Jim Overcast fitted in, he did not know.

One overshoe in stirrup, he went into his cold saddle. His rifle, too, was in hand, not in saddle-boot. One thing was certain: a brittle thought, brittle as this intense cold—from here on Jim Overcast was dangerous, and if Overcast crossed his trail, there would be a rumpus. He didn't know where Overcast fitted in. But one thing was certain: he did not trust the man. Any man who snooped was dangerous to him.

He figured about ten minutes had passed since Rawson and Ganns had ridden out of the barn. This was about the right lapse of time, and he swung west, heading for the rimrock. He aimed to get up higher, watch the two men, then spot them and work down.

Yes, and he'd watch Jim Overcast, also.

His pony was tired. The last few days had gaunted him down. Just a mess of oats morning and night, and then trying to nuzzle a little bunchgrass out of the snow, back in the rocks. Yet Bill swung him in a sharp arc, snow cutting loose from under the steel-shod hoofs.

He put him against the slope, hanging to as much brush as possible. Once the pony slipped, weak-kneed and tired, and Bill brought him up with, "Come tomorrow, fellow, and you can rest."

He wished, suddenly, he had help.

But by the time he rode to Dodson and got the sheriff out of bed and out here—Well, by that time Rawson and Ganns might be gone from Beaver Creek, taking their evidence with them in the form of bloody beaver pelts. And a game-warden had to catch his men with the evidence.

He was glad Rawson had taken no more of his hands with him. Of course, the Beaver Creek trapper would be in on this, and that meant three men—and three guns—against him. Big odds, sure. But there might be a way around them.

He still wondered how they aimed to trap the beaver. He had not seen any steel traps on their saddles. Of course, the traps might be out with the Beaver Creek trapper; therefore they would not need tote them out. If they set traps, he would have time to ride in for the sheriff, and then pick up the three in the act. And how could a man catch a beaver without traps?

He circled a hill, and saw the two riders below him. They were about one-half a mile below, heading at a lope toward the trapper's cabin. Bill swung in leather, overshoes braced against stirrups, and he looked across the moonlit snow, looking for Jim Overcast. But if the man were around, he could not see him.

He looked for two minutes, face grave. He could not see Overcast. Undoubtedly the man had ridden the other direction?

He turned his gaze back on Rawson and Ganns. Rawson rode the lead, Ganns at his flank, and the dull pound of their bronc's hoofs, there against the snow-packed trail, winged back—a lonely sound set in this icy wilderness.

Bill waited no longer; he pushed the pinto hard. Drove him along the lip of canyons, snow falling from under his bronc to slip over into space. And when he reached the hills above Beaver Creek, the pinto was sweaty despite the cold. And Bill rode down into the willows. He figured he was ahead of Ganns and Rawson. And this assumption proved correct.

He tied the pinto back in a draw and went ahead on foot, rifle in hand. He had his six-shooter from holster and in the big pocket of his overcoat, the butt sticking upward. He moved ahead, halting once to listen. He stood tense and taut, all Indian now, and listened.

NO ALIEN sound. Only the slow wind, making its dismal sounds in gaunt, leafless trees. Then he came to the clearing wherein sat the trapper's cabin, and out in front he saw the broncs of Al Ganns and Ed Rawson. But there was no lamp lit in the cabin.

Three men came out and one asked, "Two sticks of powder enough?" Another said, "That's enough."

Rawson was the first speaker, Bill knew; the second had been the trapper. They talked some more, but they were moving away, and the game-warden could not hear their words. The dogs had settled down and they trotted behind the men, noses to the snow to pick up the scent of cottontails and jackrabbits.

Powder?

Bill shook his head, openly puzzled. He watched the men move into the brush, working toward the creek, each carrying a pick and shovel. Going out after beaver, with no traps—only picks and shovels... Was this a cold trail? Men didn't dig beaver out.

Or did they?

He swung into the brush, following them. Kinikinick and rosebushes, and thick buckbrush... He worked his way toward the creek. When he reached the bank, he squatted, looking across the snow-covered ice.

Already the three men—the trapper, Al Ganns, Ed Rawson—were moving across the ice, heading for the big beaver dam. Bill could see the blank line that marked the limits of the dam. The three were silent now or, if they did talk, they talked very low, and the game-warden could not hear their words.

Bill watched, hunkered, rifle across his knees. Watched and waited, and wondered just what was what. He noticed the trapper had snapped leashes to the collars on the dogs and led them now, not letting them run free.

That meant something, but he didn't know what. Despite the gravity of the situation, a tight smile touched his lips. Here he was about ready to make an arrest, and he still didn't know how this trio intended to trap beaver. That was ironical, yet true.

Ganns went to work with his pick, digging into the beaver dam's middle. The digging, Bill knew, was tough—the dam was constructed solidly. Now he could catch the ring of the pick against gravel and logs. The moonlight reflected off the shiny pick as it rose and fell.

Rawson held the leashes now, and the trapper was watching Ganns. Ganns worked for about fifteen minutes, and the big man worked hard. Finally the trapper said something, and Bill heard the words but could not identify them due to the distance. And Ganns quit working.

The trapper squatted over the hole, working at something Bill could not see. Ganns and Rawson watched. Then the trapper moved back, stringing something along the ice, and Ganns and Rawson walked to the bank, about one hundred feet below Bill. The trapper lit a match, then turned and ran for his partners.

"Dynamite," Bill thought. "They aim to blow that dam out. An' why?"

The roar smashed aside the game-warden's thoughts. It was not a wild roar, for he figured the man had only used a small amount of powder. Sticks rose, debris lifted—a log spun upward crazily. Then the roar became lost in the sound of icy water gushing through the broken dam.

The water smashed through to freedom, flooding the lower ice below the dam, washing out work it had taken beavers months to accomplish. And still Bill Dupree couldn't understand why they had blown-up the dam. But one thing was certain, and that was that water was rushing out from under the ice above the dam. Water was rushing through the break, leaving the ice without anything under it as it bridged the distance from one creek-bank to the other.

FOR FIVE minutes, water cascaded out, silver in the golden moonlight. Gradually the dam went to pieces, the water washing away the mud and gravel beavers had toted in to weight down the logs forming the base of the dam. Somewhere ice creaked, and the sound was sharp.

Bill figured the ice would break, now that the water supporting it was gone. And this guess proved correct. It all happened at once. One moment the ice was level, sleeping under snow; the next moment, it had cracked wildly down the middle, blocks of it pitching and rising, like an earthquake had shaken it. It pulled away from the banks, leaving them muddy and free.

What had been a level surface was now an area of pitched, up-turned blocks of ice, dirty from their fall into the muddy creek-bottom, now almost devoid of water. And Bill Dupree, looking at the opposite bank, suddenly got an inkling of how these men trapped beaver.

It was new to him, and he would never forget it.

The scene was eerie, more so because of the brilliant moonlight. Blocks of ice, tumbled and disordered, and the muddy banks, dark against the moonlight. But yet the moonlight showed the entrances to the beaver dens. They were darker spots against the dark mud of the creek-banks.

When the ice had sagged into the middle of the creek bed, the beaver-holes had been left high but not dry. Now here was where the dogs would come in. No wonder Rawson needed no traps to catch beaver!

Bill moved back slightly, for now Rawson and Ganns and the trapper had gone out onto the broken ice. Rawson still led the dogs. Bill could still see them, and then he

heard something from behind him.

His blood chilled. Something—an animal or man—had moved behind him. His first thought was: it was a deer. Then logic told him a deer would have fled before this, what with dogs in the brush, along with four men. Maybe a cougar? No, a cougar would be back in the rimrock, dining off dead sheep.

He circled, moving soundlessly, all Indian now. His Sioux mother had taught him how to part brush, how to move through it without a sound, how to crouch and move ahead, stalking like an animal stalks. And this Bill Dupree did. He circled, and he came to a trail.

A narrow trail, wriggling through brush. A trail made by cottontails and bobcats through the snow. He knelt beside it, saw no boots on it, and straightened. He had not heard the sound again. He again studied the trail, but saw no tracks left by either a deer or cougar.

Then he heard something again—something he recognized as the scrape of brush against cloth. A man moving through brush that rubbed against his sheepskin overcoat? All it could be.

He straightened and waited. From the direction of the creek, he could hear Rawson talk to his men, a mumble without recognition. Did Rawson have a guard out in the brush? That didn't seem logical. Only Rawson and Ganns and the trapper had left the trapper's cabin. Back in the barn Rawson had said, "There'll be a guard...."

A shadow moved toward him, following the trail, and he caught the swift glint of moonlight on a rifle. He waited, and the man came closer, not seeing him. When he was opposite, Bill lowered his rifle barrel sharply.

The man grunted something, taken by utter surprise. One blow was enough. His knees pushed ahead, and the man went down. Bill Dupree knelt, turning him over. An ugly, small face looked up, eyes blank.

An ugly, tiny face. Homely, wrinkled like a dried prune. But, nevertheless, the face of Jim Overcast!

8

SUDDENLY Bill Dupree straightened, listening. He could hear the talk of the men along the creek. They had not heard him slug Overcast, then. The game-warden sported a tight smile as he looked down at the oldster.

"What the hell you doin' here?" he asked himself.

And he got no logical answer.

Still, he stood there, listening. Overcast, he figured, would be out for some time. Of course, the old man's muskrat-skin cap had broken the blow somewhat; yet, he was out—and he would stay that way, Bill thought, for some time yet. Then Bill got a ray of light.

This old fool must be working for Rawson. He was Rawson's scout, and he had jumped Ganns and Rawson that day, because the whole thing had been trumped up to trap one Bill Dupree, a government game-warden. Why hadn't he thought of it before? It looked simple...now.

Rawson had suspected him of being a game-warden. Ganns had tried to kill him but Ganns had failed. So Jim Overcast, while drawing Rawson's wages, had quickly stepped in, using his head. He had made out like he had rescued Bill. The ruse, now, seemed simple.

Rawson had wanted to know, for sure, whether or not he, Bill Dupree, was really a game-warden. So Jim Overcast had played a smooth card, hoping to get into Bill's confidence by presumably *rescuing* him. But Bill had told the old man nothing. He was glad of that now. He had been lucky to keep his mouth shut and not let this old traitor know he was a game-warden.

The people on this range figured Rawson and Overcast were enemies. Yet, on the side, they were friends. It was clear now, and it brought anger to Bill Dupree. An anger that showed in his dark, halfbreed face.

This anger had its wild mad sweep, then came under strict rein. He left Jim Overcast there, an unconscious shadow on that trail, and he worked toward the creek, still a Sioux and still loaded with caution. He wished he had help. But he was alone, and that was that.

He chuckled, remembering the swiftness with which Overcast had toppled. The man would have a headache when he came to, and he'd find himself in jail come morning. Bill stopped, screened by brush, and watched the men there on the creek bottom. There were still some loopholes in his mind about how they aimed to get these beaver. He was curious, too.

With the water gone from the fronts of their dens, the beaver would not run out, for they would be afraid. Bill knew that a beaver had the main room of his den up in the bank, high above the level of the water where it was dry. Now these beaver were in these dens.

They would be sitting there, an entire family—and sometimes families consisted of up to a dozen or more beavers. They would be listening to the men outside, and they would be afraid to run out. And how would Rawson get them out?

Bill watched, and then he understood. For each man took two dogs. Ganns led his dogs along the muddy bank, sliding in the mud occasionally, until he came to the two entrances to a den, one entrance above the other. Then the heavy man unleashed his dogs.

"Go get 'em, boys."

One dog went into the top entrance, one into the bottom. Bill saw that the trapper was also sending his dogs into a den, as was Rawson. These two banks were full of beaver, and the dogs would drag them out.

Bill realized these dogs were trained for this work. For a beaver had long teeth—dangerous teeth—and a beaver was big. He watched Ganns carefully, for the ape-like man was the closest.

"They're fightin' in there," Ganns said. "I kin hear them, men."

"Not so damn' loud," Rawson warned.

Ganns laughed. "You jabber like a man-scared ol' maid, fella. Now who would be out in this wilderness on sech a cold night a-watchin' us? That 'breed game-warden is pulled out. He got his belly full t'other day over on that sheep-skinnin' camp."

"Just keep your voice down," Rawson repeated.

Bill knew now why the voice-boxes had been taken from the dogs' throats. On a dangerous job like this, Ed Rawson did not want the dogs to bark, for barking would have betrayed their dirty-work, had anybody heard the mutts yapping. This deal was almost fool-proof.

Ganns said, "Here comes one cur out."

Bill saw the dog back out of the bottom-entrance. The cur was muddy, and he had to back out, for he could not turn around in the narrow cave. His rump came out first, hind-legs braced, and Bill figured he pulled out a beaver. Slowly the rest of the dog came out. Finally, Bill saw his head.

The cur had his fangs in a beaver's skull. The beaver was dead. Evidently these dogs had been thoroughly trained for this precarious work. They would get the beaver, bury fangs into his head, then shake him to kill him. All the time, they'd be dodging claws. The beaver's fangs would be powerless, with the dog getting him by the back of the head.

All the dog had to watch was the claws. And claws had raked this mutt across the shoulder, for Bill saw the red of blood. The beaver was big and the dog, now in the open, tried to shake him. But the beaver was too heavy and too limp.

"Don't let him tear that hide," Rawson warned.

Ganns batted the dog to one side, hitting him with the broad part of the shovel. The dog released the dead beaver. Ganns grabbed him, put him back in the hole, and said, "Get 'em out, mutt!"

The trapper's dog brought out a beaver. Rawson's dogs backed out, both carrying beavers. Now Bill

knew why he had not found steel traps at Rawson's spread.

These dogs were used instead of traps.

Bill hunkered, watching. When he would not believe him. This was a new way to trap beaver. It was fast, and a man with a few dogs could work out an entire section overnight, once a dam had been blasted, draining water from under the ice.

But he had seen enough. He did not want these three to kill any more beaver. Now, with the evidence he had in the form of dead beavers, with what he had seen, he could make his pinch. But how would he make it?

Coldly, methodically, he went over plan after plan, trying to find some way safe to him. He decided he would wait until the three got in a group. Then he would come out of the brush, rifle on them. That would have to be soon, for Jim Overcast would not be unconscious too long, and if Overcast came in behind him...

"How many we got now?" the trapper asked.

Rawson said, "Not enough."

THE TRAPPER walked over to Rawson; the man carried a beaver in each hand, holding them by their broad tails. He left his rifle leaning against a cake of ice. Rawson had his rifle behind him, also leaning against some ice.

The trapper threw his beavers in with the three Rawson had caught. Ganns said, "Here are two more," and walked over, carrying them also by the tail. Ganns left his rifle leaning against the bank, back by the beaver-den he had been working. And Bill knew it was now or never.

He stood up, leg muscles quivering. Despite the intense cold, he was suddenly hot, and a sweat formed across his chest under his woolen shirt. He swallowed, wet his lips. Then, rifle up, he left the brush directly above the trio, and not more than seventy feet away.

They did not see him until he spoke.

By that time, Al Ganns had moved about ten feet, heading back for his spot, for one of his dogs had just backed out, muddy and dirty, pulling a big dead beaver. Ganns stopped like he had been shot through the heart.

Rawson had turned, sliding a little in the mud, but not noticing his unsure footing. And the trapper stared up at Bill Dupree, his mouth open in the moonlight.

For Bill had said, "This is the law! Stand just where you are! Don't move, 'cause I got a rifle on you!"

That had been all. And the words had riveted these men solidly.

The trapper stood, then clicked shut his teeth. Ganns looked, big head tilted, for his muskrat-skin cap was down a little on the right, obscuring his vision. Rawson had his legs wide, staring up.

Bill knew he would never forget that scene. And he knew he might never live to remember it long. He had made a mistake by letting Ganns move out of the group. But it was too late now.

They stood there, the four of them, stiff as puppets, watchful as circling curs, waiting for a chance to pitch in and fight. They were like four dogs, Bill suddenly reasoned. The moon was cold; the moon was neutral. The wind was cold, too. Low and cold.

Rawson spoke first. "Bill Dupree?"

Bill realized the shadows hid his face. "Bill Dupree." His repitition of Rawson's words was made in an even voice that even surprised himself. His first jittery feeling had left. He was strangely calm. The end was here. There was danger for him, maybe death—but he was calm. That was strange.

But he had no time to debate over his emotions. His eyes never left the group. "You worked it slick," he said. "But this means the pen for you three. As you guessed, I'm a gamewarden."

Ganns said, "You damned double-dealin' half-breed. I should have killed you that day on the sheep-skinnin' camp!"

"You tried."

Ganns looked at Rawson. Rawson was still watching Bill Dupree. The trapper moaned something, like he was in pain. It sounded like, "Gawd, the pen for us. Caught in the act...."

Ganns kept looking at Rawson. The ape-like man still had his head cocked, and he asked, "Well, boss, what do we do? Go with this scissor-bill of a halfbreed? You're the boss."

BILL DUPREE said, "Walk up that bank with your hands up! Keep them up, even if you start to slide and fall in the mud! I've got this hammer back and this Winchester shoots straight!"

Ganns ignored him. The trapper also watched Rawson now. Rawson was stone, and Ganns asked again, "Well, Ed, what is it?"

Rawson said, "We give up, Dupree."

The words ran through the gamewarden, and the release made him relax for a second. And, in so doing, he fell for Rawson's ruse. For Rawson, instead of coming ahead, fell to one knee, there in the mud.

"Grab your guns, men!"

The scene was action—controlled, deadly action. Rawson had a six-shooter in his far pocket—the pocket away from Bill Dupree. He brought this up, acting quickly, and he slammed out one quick uncertain shot.

He fired so fast the gun-flame was without color. And, as Ed Rawson fired, Al Ganns made his lunge, and Al Ganns was fast. Despite his immense bulk, he was quick on his feet—Bill Dupree had learned that, to his sorrow, when he and Ganns had fought over there at the sheep-skinning camp.

From the corner of one eye, Bill glimpsed Ganns' lunge for the rifle. The trapper, too, was running for his gun. The trapper fell, sliding in mud, ten feet from his rifle.

Bill realized, with sinking heart, that Rawson had broken up what seemed to be an easy arrest. Rawson had more guts than he had figured. With a rifle on him, Rawson had made his play, snapping out that hidden pistol. And now the bullet hit Bill Dupree.

It smashed into his right thigh, sending him down. It was like a hard fist—a fist as strong as one of Al Ganns' blows—had smashed into his thigh. He went to his knees, and he shot more by instinct than by sight. He brought the rifle up, and the stock had not reached his shoulder before the hammer fell.

Rawson took the bullet, and he went down quickly. He did not scream. It was as though a man had tackled him from the front, smashing him around the ankles. He lay in the mud, face down.

Bill thought, "He's out...for a while, anyway." A glance told him the trapper was still down in the mud where he had fallen. A man was screaming, the words breaking through the dying gun-roar.

"Don't shoot! For hell's sake, don't murder me! I won't reach for my rifle!"

A stabbing glance told Bill Dupree the man meant what he said, for his rifle was still some distance away. He realized, in that second of blurred action, that this man was only a hireling, nothing more. And now the ice-water of Death was frozen in his veins. His shout told that.

Bill swung the rifle, aiming to cover Al Ganns. But he had reckoned without taking into account the big man's speed. Ganns' had the rifle, and he shot. Bill did not hear the whine of the bullet for his own shot came in with a roar.

He hit Ganns, he was sure.

By this time, the pain from his thigh was obscuring his vision. He glimpsed Ganns running into the brush; he shot. But by that time buckbrush and shadows had reached out to drag in Al Ganns.

RAWSON HAD not moved. He lay the same way—on his belly, face in mud. And with his nose and mouth covered with mud—Rawson, he knew, was dead.

And he had not wanted to shoot anybody, let alone kill a man. But Rawson and Ganns had been desper-

ate, for bars had loomed ahead of them. Rawson was out of the play but the trapper wasn't, and therefore he could not follow Ganns.

He tried to stand up, but he couldn't. Then he realized he was not able to follow Ganns, even if he had wanted. The trapper sat still now, watching him. Bill kept his rifle on him.

"I'll go peaceful," the man repeated.

From behind came a noise. Ganns had evidently fallen over a snow-covered log or something. The world was uncertain, the sound distant, and then Bill heard footsteps behind him. He tried to get the rifle around.

"You won't need that rifle, younker."

Through shifting lines, Bill Dupree saw old Jim Overcast, rifle under his arm. "You come to, huh?" The whole jig was up. The deal had blown itself apart like dynamite was under it. Ganns had got away, the trapper was unhurt, and old Jim Overcast was here, and he figured Jim worked for Rawson.

Overcast chuckled. "So you slugged me, huh? Figured it was Rawson who did that."

That didn't make sense. Rawson, slugging his own man... Bill realized he had again made a wrong guess regarding this prune-faced oldster.

"Slugged that moose of a Ganns back yonder," Overcast was saying. "You shot him through the shoulder. Say, you got one, huh? Thar in that ham?"

"I don't savvy you," Bill said.

Again that chuckle. "Me, I didn't savvy you either, Bill. You mind a gent named Matt Driscoll?"

"He's my boss."

"Well, Matt Driscoll used to be my boss, too. But I retired some time back from the game-warden work. Well, Matt contacts me, tells me he's sendin' a man up this way, for me to work with him. But shucks, I didn't know for sure—well, I never knowed a halfbreed worked for the gover'ment game— Hey, you're passin' out—

Bill Dupree understand lots of things, now. But he was very, very sleepy.

* * *

They came into town with the dead Ed Rawson tied across his horse, with the trapper and Al Ganns riding ahead. They had the dead beavers in sacks and the dogs trotted behind them.

"You feel better now, Bill?"

"You tied it up good," Bill Dupree said. "Lucky no bones was busted. From here on, Mary can take care of me."

That was a good thought. On the ride in, old Jim Overcast had explained all. "An' I don't blame you for sluggin' me, son. You did just what your duty called for. You didn't reveal your identity, an' I should've come right out an' asked you who you was."

"I split the hide on your skull, huh?"

Old Jim rubbed his head. "Yeah, you sure did. Well, here's the doc's office, an' here comes the sheriff, outa the saloon. This town'll come awake now. There's a woman yonderly, comin' outa the hotel. That looks like Mary, don't she?"

Bill looked. He'd know that form anywhere. "That's her, Jim." He felt warm and clean inside.

He had been sure, all along, that the sheep pelts had played some part in this game. Ganns had talked and verified his guesses. When the sheep-hides had been shipped, they were shipped flat, one piled on the other. And between them had been placed the beaver pelts.

Now he knew why Rawson had been so anxious to buy dead sheep to skin. He needed the pelts to smuggle out the beaver skins. Well, he'd wire ahead, and somebody in St. Louis would soon be under arrest.

He jerked his attention back to Jim Overcast.

The old man had cupped his mittens around his whiskery mouth. His prune-like face wrinkled more than ever as he shouted, "Hey, Mary! Come an' git 'im!"

THE END

This short-cut would settle Rideout's Fate

Gun Ghost Rider

by Allan K. Echols

(author of "Blood on the Star")

Jim Rideout had been ruined once before by this gent, Bryce. Now, Bryce was here like a malicious ghost, about to repeat the past . . .

THERE HAD been a fleeting sense of guilt in Jim Rideout ever since he had thrown in with Bob Colby on a deal to buy and drive cattle up from Texas to the new railhead in Kiowa. And the more he had got to know Colby on the drive, the better he liked the old man, and the more guilty he felt about not having told him about the affair down in the Mercedes Valley.

Now the drive was over, the cattle were bedded down on the flats outside of Kiowa and Jim Rideout was in town looking for the buyer and getting money to pay off the crew, while Colby did some business at the store.

Rideout was in *Kelly's Rest* having a glass of beer when he saw the man who knew more about the trouble at Mercedes Valley than Rideout had ever told anybody. Knowing this, and knowing this man, Rideout's sense of guilt flooded through him now with a sickening intensity. He

should have told Colby the whole story. Now it was too late, for Colby would certainly hear it from other sources.

The man who brought this trouble up out of the past was a husky blond man with a bulldog jaw and a yellow mustache that swept down below his chin, and he was sitting and talking to Ben Dusenberry, the buyer that Rideout wanted to see.

Rideout, lean as a fence post, broad shouldered and with the strength of a man born to hard work, looked particularly grave for a man on the near side of thirty, and now under the tension of this sight of the man out of yesterday, he looked older, tired. There were the marks of strength on him, but inside him there was a fresh pain and a tightening of his nerves, like the turmoil of a man who has to go into battle.

He finished his beer while he braced himself for what he expected. He quickly put aside the temptation to turn and go out of the place and send Colby in to see Dusenberry, because he knew that he would be around for a week and there was no chance of his completely avoiding the man who now talked with the cattle buyer.

This man with the outthrust jaw and the yellow mustache and cold blue eyes was named Charlie Bryce, and he had been on that drive that ended so disastrously in Mercedes Valley.

Knowing that he could not long evade the unpleasantness, Rideout left his beer and crossed the room to Dusenberry's table, and it was only then that Charlie Bryce looked up and saw him. Bryce's eyes widened a moment, then his lids drooped, and he didn't speak.

Rideout said to Dusenberry, "I've got a herd of cattle out on the creek. About eight hundred head of good feeder stuff. Could you come out and have a look at them?"

"Why, sure," Dusenbury answered. "Always looking for good feeders."

Now it was that Bryce spoke up. His voice was slow, deceptively soft. "Well, now, I don't know as we want to handle his stuff, Ben. It wouldn't be a good thing."

Rideout felt the sharp blaze of resentment burn up to a hot flame. Ben Dusenberry was a sound and reliable man, and Rideout was both puzzled and angry at this apparent tieup between him and Bryce.

"What do you mean by 'we?'" he snapped. "I was talking to Dusenberry."

A cool smile exposed Bryce's white teeth. "It's Dusenberry and Bryce now, Rideout. I've just bought into the business, and I'll be doing a lot of the buying. As I was saying, I don't think we'd be interested in your stuff."

"And why *not?*"

RIDEOUT knew the answer before he heard it, but he wanted it to come out in the open, where he could get his hands on it. It had been hidden in the deep recesses of his own mind and the minds of others for too long.

"Yeah," Dusenberry echoed interestedly. "What's the matter with Rideout's stuff?"

"It ain't the stuff, it's Rideout, himself. We'd probably end up with the seat of our breeches in a cactus if we touched anything he had his hands on," he said bluntly. "He's poison."

Rideout's voice was cold, hiding the fire burning in him. "You'd better go on and explain that remark, friend," he said.

"I'd be glad to," Bryce answered. "You see, Ben, Rideout here is a slick hombre—too slick to deal with. Here's the way he works. He made up a drive down on the Mercedes river one year. I was on it. Understand, he didn't buy cattle to drive, he got 'em on consignment. He'd go to neighbors and make a deal to pick up their cattle and drive 'em to market. He was supposed to sell the cattle and bring back the money, and collect for his services a certain percentage of what he got.

"We're bedded down one night with this herd of seven hundred cattle when we're hit, by rustlers. There's a big gunbattle and a lot of

the boys is killed, and the whole herd driven off and nobody ever seen hide nor hair of 'em again.

"And where was Rideout when this happened? He was around until the first shot was fired, then he disappeared. He run like a rabbit the minute he smelled a whiff of gunsmoke, he didn't show up around where his neighbors was for almost six months. Them neighbors of his had lost their stock and never got a dime.

"Everybody knew what had happened. He had planned this drive of cattle that didn't belong to him, and he'd planned to have some of his gang steal 'em from him. He rode off with the rustlers, and didn't come back till he figgered the men that had lost their cattle had got over their madness."

"Well, they was going to arrest him as an accomplice of the rustlers, but not having any actual proof that would stand up in court, they couldn't touch him. He's a slick one. I wouldn't want to touch his herd. It might be every head of it stolen, you can't never tell."

Jim Rideout felt his mouth go dry; the blood rushed to his face and the muscles in his arms tightened like whipcord. Then suddenly his open hand slapped Bryce across the mouth with a sharp clap, which captured the attention of every man in *Kelly's Rest*.

Bryce wiped a trickle of blood off a split lip in stunned silence and stared at his hand while his astonishment built into a burning rage which flamed in his face. He took a deep breath and held it while his hand went slowly for the gun at his hip, like a panther crouching to spring.

His hand came up slowly with the weapon—and then Ben Dusenberry swung his beer bottle against Bryce's wrist and knocked the gun spinning.

"We don't shoot unarmed men around here, Bryce," he said quietly. "Fight like a man if you want to fight."

There was fire in Bryce's eyes as he glanced angrily at Dusenberry, then he turned his attention back to Rideout and darted up from his chair like a suddenly released spring, fists cocked, lips drawn back over his white teeth.

He walked into a piston punch from Rideout's fist which jolted him to a stop. He wiped his flattened nose on the sleeve of his shirt and looked back at Rideout. "Now," he said, "I'm going to tear you apart and throw the pieces to the dogs."

Bryce was an ox of a man, and he came in on Rideout with heavy blows that thudded and hurt. Rideout braced himself and took them, dodging some, getting the full impact of the others, and it was evident to him that the man had a killing power behind his fists.

His own blows landed on Bryce, and it was like hitting a stone wall, and they seemed to have no effect on him at all. The man was pure bone and muscle, and his body was gross and insensitive to pain. He was not even breathing hard, while every blow of his sapped some of Rideout's strength. And Rideout saw quickly that he was no match for the man in trading blows to the body.

He aimed them all at Bryce's chin, and Bryce lowered his chin into his chest for protection as they fought all over the floor of the saloon. The customers moved back out of their way, and there was no noise except the pounding of fists and the shuffle of their feet on the sanded floor.

Rideout's time was short, and he was desperate. He braced himself, let one of Bryce's blows slide over his shoulder, then sent a punch into Bryce's stomach in a swift change of attack. The punch caught Bryce by surprise and knocked the wind out of him. He doubled over for a moment, dropping his guard to his middle to prevent a repetition of the blow, lifting his head slightly.

And with that quick opening, Rideout lifted himself to his toes as he sent his right fist in a long sweeping uppercut which started from below his belt and cracked on Bryce's chin.

Bryce's head flew up, his knees buckled, and he went over backward on the floor, all in one sweeping motion. But he was not knocked out;

he was just knocked down. And as he landed on his back, he rolled over quickly to get up—and then he stopped.

His hand was within inches of his gun!

He saw the weapon and grabbed for it, getting it into his left hand. Rideout saw the movement and dived on him, as a man would dive on a roped steer trying to get up. Bryce was transferring his gun from his left to his right hand when Rideout landed on him.

They wrestled for the gun there on the floor, and there was a murmur and an uneasy movement of the men in the saloon.

Bryce tried to get the gun into position, and during that brief movement, Rideout heard the ominous click of the weapon's hammer coming back in response to the pressure on the double-action trigger. He caught the cylinder of the weapon with his hand over the top of the frame, his fingers on one side and his thumb on the other. The trigger of a double-action weapon is connected intimately with the cylinder, and as he held the cylinder so that it would not revolve in unison with the other movement, the trigger could not be pulled back any farther. Thus Rideout's life hung in the grasp of his fingers and his thumb—and thus they wrestled and the strength of two strong men was thrown into the balance around the trigger and the cylinder of the weapon.

And then as Rideout felt the slick metal slipping in his grasp, he wrenched the gun so that the barrel which was between them was pointed away from him. And he was doing this when the cylinder slipped out of his grasp and he heard the gun explode with a muffled sound, and felt the burning powder of the muzzle blast burning the skin of his chest.

Bryce's tensed muscles went limp as he grunted, and all the stamina went out of him, and he relaxed on his back on the floor—with a black parch of powder burn on his white shirt. And from the center of the scorched area there dribbled a pulsating scarlet stream.

THE SHERIFF had come in and sent somebody for Doctor Broome. The doctor had found that Bryce's wound was not serious, and had sent the man down to his house on a stretcher. And then the sheriff had questioned everybody after hearing Rideout's side of the story.

"Ben, how'd you see it?" Sheriff Farley asked.

"It's just like Rideout said," Dusenberry admitted. "Bryce had just gone into partnership with me in business, but I don't hold for what he did. He made some mighty strong talk about Rideout, and he tried to shoot him while they were fighting. It was all his own fault."

The sheriff had heard them all, and they all had told the same story. "In that case," Farley said, "I reckon you're justified Rideout. That settles it for now. But if Bryce gets up and around again, I don't want any killing around here. The things he said about you, that's your business. Right or wrong, others heard them, and they'll be talking. I don't want you going around shooting everybody you think might be repeating the story. There wouldn't be anybody left in town alive." He turned and went out.

As the sheriff left, Bob Colby came in. He had been down at the *Mercantile* when he heard about the trouble, and by the time he got here it was all over. He came up and joined Rideout and Dusenberry.

"What happened, Jim?" he asked.

Rideout looked about the saloon, noting the men who either had their backs to him or looked at him queerly. He said, "Is there any place we can talk, Dusenberry?"

Dusenberry got up. "Yeah, come on back to Kelly's office."

In the office, Rideout took a seat in a chair. He was exhausted from the fight, but his greatest pain came from the fact that now he was going to have to belatedly tell Bob the things he should have told him at the time Bob had offered to finance this drive.

"I suppose you already heard the story that Bryce told," he said.

"Yeah, but I didn't believe a word of it, naturally. I been around long enough to know men, and nobody can tell me that you ever ran out and deserted a herd of cattle left in your charge."

"I didn't, Rideout answered, "but there was some trouble down on the Mercedes, and the way things turned out, it looked to some people just about the way Bryce told it, There was just enough facts in the yarn he invented to make it look bad for me. This is what really happened."

He rolled a cigarette and lit it before continuing.

"I did start a drive of consignment cattle. Some rancher friends had got me to do it, and was to pay me for my work out of the money I was to bring back for them. I got the herd going with a pickup crew that wasn't much. Up on the Mercedes, a little town of the same name, there was a drunken fight among the men and a couple of them killed a couple of others, and I had to get some new men. Bryce was one of them.

"Bryce had been all up and down that part of the country, and he was counted a pretty slick hombre with a crooked dollar, but nobody had actually ever got anything on him, and because I needed men, I hired him.

"I figured that with him under my nose he wasn't likely to be able to pull anything on me. I was wrong. Two nights out of Mercedes the herd was hit by a gang of about a dozen rustlers. There was four men riding herd, including Bryce. I wasn't sleeping that night, and for some reason, I got on my horse and rode out toward the herd.

"It was moonlight, and I saw Bryce circling the herd, coming toward me, and it was at just that minute that the rustlers hit. Bryce never fired a shot at them. Instead, he rode out to join them. I saw that! He fired at me!

"My horse went down with his leg in a prairie dog hole, and fell on top of me. My head hit a rock—and when I came to, it was all over. I reckon Bryce thought his shot had killed me, instead of me just being unconscious from hitting my head on a rock. Anyway, there wasn't a cow in sight. There were four dead cowboys; Bryce was gone. The remuda was scattered and the wagons were just standing there abandoned. There wasn't a thing left. And I was still dazed and half crazy from the blow I got on the head.

"I wandered around till I found a Mexican sheepherder's shack, and he put some kind of plant poultices on my head and took care of me a few weeks till I was strong enough to travel.

"I went and scouted around Mercedes to see what I could do about the whole business. I found out that Bryce had put out the yarn about me being in cahoots with the rustlers, and that the story had been believed by the people that had trusted their cattle to me. I felt that Bryce had engineered the whole thing, but I never could get enough proof to make my version stick. The cattle nor the rustlers never were found, but Bryce had a lot of money after that.

"Anyhow, people had been convinced of Bryce's story that I had pulled a fast one on them, and I never did get enough proof that it was Bryce to make anybody believe me. So, I got disgusted and left that part of the country to start over where I'd have a fair chance."

Old Bob Colby laid a hand on his partner's shoulder. "Jim, I know how it is. You can't fight a wrong idea with just words, and if you can't back up your story, no matter how true it is, people won't believe you. They'll always believe the first side of it they hear."

"I learned that, and that's why I've been regretting that I didn't tell you this before you threw in with me. The way it is now, you've got your money tied up in this stock and Dusenberry won't take them on account of me being mixed up with you."

"I threw in with you, so I'm sticking with you," Colby said. "And come to think about it, Dusenberry's partners with the man that probably

pulled that deal on you."

Dusenberry was immediately defensive. "Now listen here, you fellows. You've got to see my position. I can't buy your cattle because Bryce controls the purse strings right now. But I don't like what I saw of Bryce tonight, myself. The way I got into partnership with him was that I went broke last year, when the bottom fell out of the market. Not long ago Bryce showed up here and we made a partnership deal. I had the reputation, and he had the money and knew cattle. I may be wrong about this, myself, but you see where I stand. Bryce has the money I'm operating with, and I can't go against him. Maybe I'm in a fix, but that's how it is."

Both Rideout and Colby knew Dusenberry as a responsible man, and they accepted his statement, and some of Colby's resentment at him faded.

"Looks like we're all three in a fix, then," he conceded. "Well, Jim, we can drive the stock on to Fairfax. It's only a few days more."

"I wish you'd stick around a few days and see if we can get this business straightened out," Dusenberry said. "I don't like this any more than you do, and if Bryce is what you say he is, I can't afford to keep on in business with him."

"We can't afford to wait," Rideout answered.

As they came out of Kelly's office, the doctor was back at the bar having a beer. He saw Dusenberry and called out, "Your pardner ain't in bad shape. Just a fractured rib that knocked the wind out of him for a while. He'll be as ornery as ever by tomorrow or next day."

The doctor evidently did not think much of Bryce.

RIDEOUT and Colby had no choice but to drive their herd on to Fairfax, and they started early the next morning, reaching Pecan Creek by nightfall, where they bedded down.

They were having supper when they heard the clattering of hooves, and Dusenberry came up to the fire on a sweated horse. It was apparent to Rideout that the cattle buyer was under a strain, but he accepted a cup of coffee before he had anything to say.

Then he said to Rideout and Colby, "Let's take a walk, will you?"

They walked away from the camp where the cook and a few others were, and out by the rope corral holding the remuda, Dusenberry stopped.

"You fellows may think I'm playing along with Bryce, my not buying your herd, and all. But the fact is, it looks like I'm in more of a fix than I realized. I wired Mercedes where I've got a cousin, and asked him about Bryce. My cousin thinks about him like you do. I got tied up with the wrong man, I guess.

"Then this came up in town today; Bryce was staying in bed on account of that flesh wound and slightly fractured rib, and he had a couple of visitors which Doc says were hard looking customers. Bryce got out of bed and went off with them, and they rode out of town in a hurry. He didn't even get in touch with me."

"Don't you trust Bryce?" Rideout asked pointedly.

"Hell no, now that I see what kind of hombre he is. I might be in danger myself."

"How?"

"When Bryce and me formed the partnership, he had it put into the agreement that if either of us died, the other inherited the business automatically. And then we both took out insurance policies in favor of each other. He could make more out of this partnership putting a bullet into me than he could legitimately, couldn't he?"

"I begin to see your point," Rideout said. He got to his feet and paced back and forth a moment, then added, "When a crook gets away with a stunt once, he's apt to use it again. I think he might try to grab our herd—and tonight, too."

He turned to his partner. "Bob," he said, "Nobody sleeps tonight. I want every man awake with his gun on and his horse saddled."

Rideout passed the word, and a stir

of excitement spread through the camp. Men dug their weapons out of their warbags, oiled them and loaded them with fresh ammunition. They rode out and relieved other men who came in and ate and made their guns ready. Time ticked off slowly, and the double guard held the cattle tightly bunched.

Dusenberry watched the preparations with nervous interest, and then with sudden decision he found Rideout and said, "Look here, if you could let me have a fresh horse out of your remuda, I'd like to stick around."

"No use in your getting yourself into anything."

"But there is," Dusenberry protested. "I'm mixed up in it to a certain extent. It's my partner you're looking out for, and I've got my own name to protect."

Rideout passed the word, and a stir more he saw of him, and he rode over to the remuda and had the wrangler get him a fresh horse. Dusenberry changed saddles and threw his own animal into the remuda. He borrowed an extra hand gun from one of the men and strapped it on.

The full moon came up and lighted the prairie, and somewhere in the distance a wolf howled, and then a coyote barked. Rideout was everywhere about the herd, and still he was not satisfied. He rode back to the wagons where Colby and Dusenberry were waiting.

"I think the three of us and another man ought to ride a wide circle, say about a quarter of a mile from the herd. That would give us a chance to spot anybody coming in and give the alarm before they got too close to the cattle."

And so the three of them, along with a rider they called away from the herd, rode a wide circle a quarter of a mile from the herd, and the moolight was now bright enough for them to see each other, so that nobody could ride between them without being seen.

And it was that precaution which enabled Rideout to spot the approaching riders when they bore down on the cattle.

Rideout parked his horse in the shadow of a lone tree while he watched them for a brief moment to see what they would do. They had come out of the woods down by the ford, riding at a canter. While Rideout watched, he counted three of them who spread out, turned their horses toward the campfire and wagons, and set their horses to a lope.

Not seeing another group which was approaching the other side of the herd a half a mile away, Rideout got the impresseion that this would be Bryce's little group intent on finding him—Rideout—rather than a raid on the cattle.

This, then, was a personal matter between himself and Bryce, and it was not right to drag the others into it. He spurred his horse toward the camp, loosening his guns in his two holsters, but holding his fire, not wanting to attract the men from the herd. This was his job alone.

HE SAW the men approach the campfire and circle it on their horses, and he was glad that he had sent his own men all out, even the cook. He rode on toward the attackers, and was within a hundred yards of the camp when the three riders, circling the camp like Indians, let loose a withering fire on the covered wagons. Apparently when they had seen nobody sleeping on the ground, they had decided that the sleepers were hiding in the wagons, and they were trying to take them by surprise and anihilate them.

As Rideout rode up he heard a loud and familiar voice shout. "The tall lean one with the black hair is Rideout; save him for me!"

That was the voice of Bryce!

Rideout pulled his horse up short within fifty feet of the camp and shouted.

"You looking for me, Bryce?"

Bryce then jerked his own horse up on his haunches and shouted, "That's him, men. I take care of him. You hit for the herd! They'll need you."

As Bryce spoke, Rideout heard a sudden splurge of gunfire out on the

prairie. He had made a mistake; Bryce had divided his forces into two parties, one for the herd and one for the camp!

Rideout should have headed for the herd at sight of them instead of coming to camp. But it was too late now. Bryce was leveling his gun at him, and trying to control his jumpy horse at the same time.

Bryce's shot came just as Rideout pulled his own trigger. Both men missed, and both horses reared and snorted. Bryce threw two angry shots at Rideout in rapid succession, but with no effect, on account of his bucking animal. Then he thought better of wasting his ammunition and held his fire.

Rideout slid off his own bucking horse, knowing he would waste ammunition shooting from the saddle. His horse darted away and Rideout stood waiting. Bryce on a bucking horse was no easy shot in the deceptive moonlight at a distance of fifty feet.

Then the cursing Bryce jumped from his own animal and started running directly toward Rideout, as though his rage at the man who had publicly whipped him, and who knew the truth about him, were so great that it had destroyed all caution. He shot twice more as he ran, and his second bullet nicked Rideout in the leg, but left him standing.

Then Bryce's common sense halted him as he saw that he was wasting his ammunition. He stood with spread legs and lifted his gun with more care this time.

And then Rideout shot him once and he fell to the ground on his back. He rolled over and got up slowly, and turned around on unsteady feet, and lifted his gun.

And then Rideout shot him again, just as Bryce fired. They both hit the ground this time, for both bullets had found their mark. Bryce's slug had creased Rideout's skull and knocked him into oblivion.

When Rideout regained consciousness he was on his back under a tree, and the doctor was among those around him. His leg was stiff and sore, and his head ached and was covered with a bandage. He looked around at the men, puzzled as to where he was and what had happened.

It was old Bob Colby, his partner, who squatted near him, rolled him a cigarette and explained.

"We beat off them rustlers because of that idea of yours of putting the second circle outside the first one. Killed three of them and wounded a couple more. And they was willing to talk to save themselves from a rope. Bryce didn't die right off, and we made a deal with him to get him a doctor in exchange for his confession of his part in your Mercedes trouble and in this little business. So, that'll square you with your neighbors back home, though Bryce won't live to hang."

Ben Dusenberry said, "Tell him about the cattle, Bob."

"Yeah," Colby went on. "Bryce won't live, and so the trap he laid for Dusenberry backfires on him, and Dusenberry gets the business and Bryce's insurance. So, he's going to buy the herd at top prices, and he wants us to tie in with him on a three-way deal, in which you and me will go out and buy and drive the stuff, while he handles the selling end. It'll make more money for all of us."

"Sounds good to me," Rideout grinned. "It'll help me pay off those Mercedes folks all the quicker."

He relaxed and felt free in his mind for the first time since that night at Mercedes a long time ago. It was a good feeling for a man to have.

THE END

★ INDIANS? ★

True Fact Feature

by The Lawdog

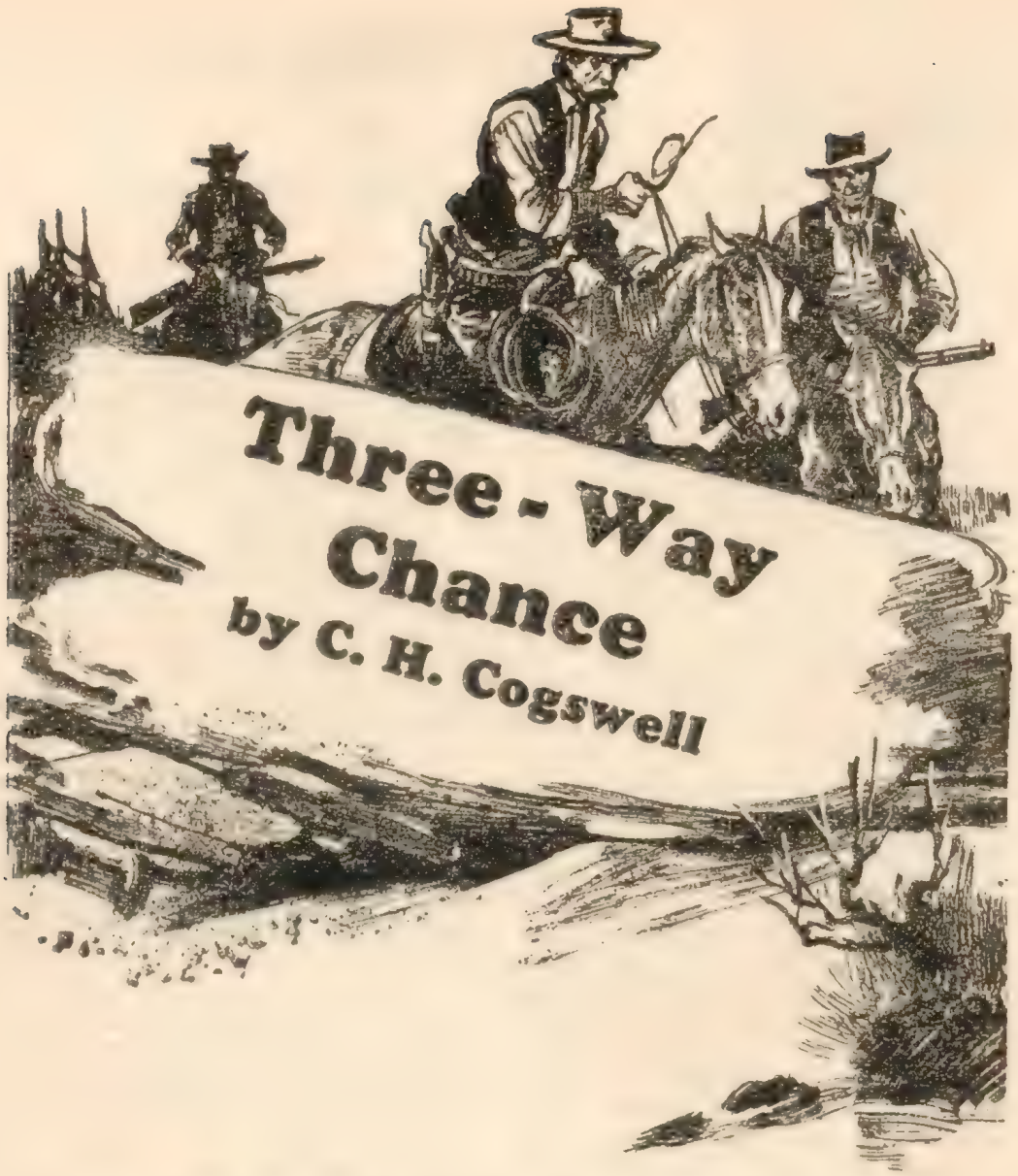
A NICE WESTERN fiction device is to have the villain disguise his men as Indians. Then they raid the poor white settlers, kill them, steal the heroine, and get away with lots of booty. You can imagine how terribly incensed the sheriff is when he hears the news. He gets his boys ready, and they go out on the warpath to teach the Indians a lesson. Somewhere along the road comes our hero who shouts, "The Indians are innocent, Sheriff. It was white renegades." What a plot! It has a terrible odor about it because you, the reader, know it can't happen. Yeah, not in fiction, but it did happen in real life.

Walla Walla, back in the days of '63 and '64, was not exactly a peaceful place. Farming had started in the valley and two or three flour mills had already been built. But the place was also the winter quarters for most of the packers and teamasters, and was full of miners, bullwackers, mule-skinners, stockmen, and cut-throats. "A man for breakfast" was not an uncommon morning salutation. Men were held up, shot, stabbed, sling-shotted, clubbed, or doped. Finally the nice citizens got mad and formed a "Walla Walla Vigilantes Committee". The bad white men either departed on foot alive, or from tree branches, not so alive.

Then another problem arose. The renegade Indians, mostly Bannacks went on the warpath, looting and stealing, and killing. And of course, all Indians were blamed, and that meant all Indians were bad. The territory between the Powder River and the Burnt River was no man's land. Here the Indians would wait for camp to be made. Then they would stampede and run off the pack animals. Shots were exchanged, but one miracle always took place. No dead Indians remained around to be identified.

In the spring of '64, Colonel George Hunter started with a pack train for Boise. He was well aware of the dangers which awaited the men. When the group reached the Burnt River, they made camp. Instead of going to sleep and leaving only a small guard, they were all ready, with six-shooters and rifles, to meet any attempt to stampede their animals.

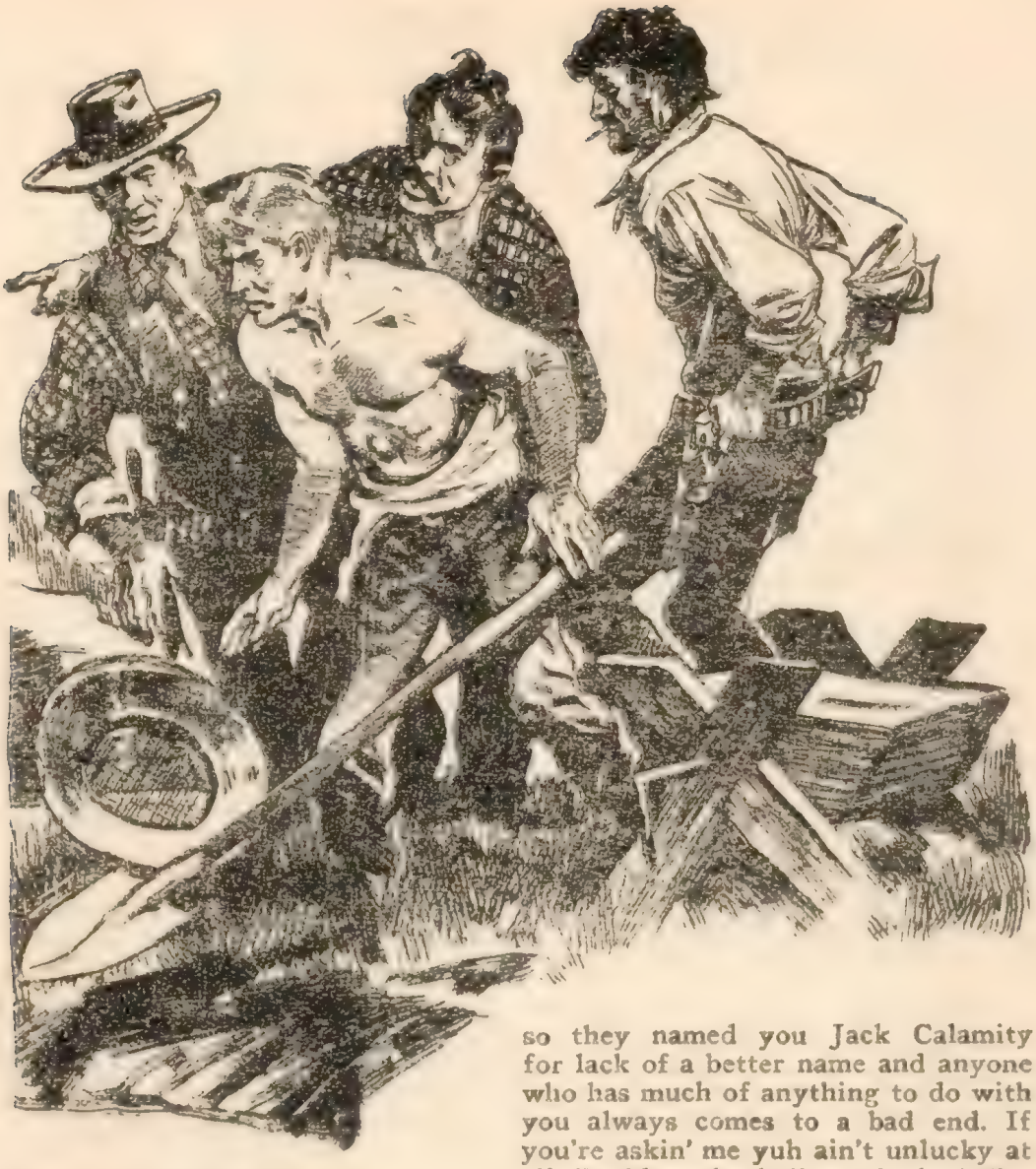
The Indians came quietly, but the guards were ready. Shots were exchanged, and some of the animals fled. In the morning the bell horses were mounted and after a while the stray animals followed the bells and came back to camp. A count was taken and not an animal lost. But not a body of a dead Indian could be found. There was lots of blood on the ground and then Colonel Hunter made a strange discovery! On the grass he found a cap made from the mane of a black horse. This was done by stripping the skin from the top of the neck of a black-manned horse and stitching the ends together like a hat band. In a moment everything was clear. This cap, when worn on the head of a man, resembled the long straight black hair of an Indian. The Indians —were white men! No wonder they never left a wounded or dead man behind. But somehow they had lost this one disguise. So you see, it really did happen, once upon a time.



Every time Loco Jack Calamity tried to buck Lady Luck, he failed. But a gold strike made it appear as if things had changed, at last. Or had they . . .?

SUNDAY afternoon, the week before pay-day, Loco Jack Calamity was bemoaning his fate to anyone who would listen. A gawky youngster of sixteen or seventeen, all eyes and ears was his only faithful listener. "And when she quit me for that gamblin' feller," Calamity explained, "it knocked the props clean out from under me. I figgered there was only one thing more to do—take the three way chance. That's the only way to do it, that way there can't be any slip up and I figger if I'm goin' to do a thing like that, to be sure of doin' a good job."

"But Loco," the Kid leaned forward eagerly, "what's this three way



chance you mention?"

"Well, to go back to the beginning Kid, I gotta explain to yuh that I'm the unluckiest man in the world. Just plain born unlucky. Why, do you know what?"

"Yeah, we know all about it Loco," Missouri Slim, who never believed anything he heard and always looked twice in the mirror for fear he couldn't believe his eyes, interceded. "We've all heard the tale a hundred times. You was borned comin' acrost the desert and the Indians burned the wagon train and when the soldiers came up you was the only one left, so they named you Jack Calamity for lack of a better name and anyone who has much of anything to do with you always comes to a bad end. If you're askin' me yuh ain't unlucky at all. Besides who believes in luck?"

"Aw Slim," Sour Dough Goodall chided, "what difference does it make? If he wants to tell it, let him tell it."

"Sure," Slim slumped on the bench at the table, "you got good reason to listen. Ain't he grub staked yuh a dozen times? If yuh had the sense God gave a billy goat, you could tell by just lookin' at them there hills there ain't no gold."

"You mind your own business," the little old prospector bristled, a gleam coming into his faded blue eyes and his seamed face stiffening. "What's

between me and Calamity is none of yours or anyone else's business, and one of these days I'll bring in a hand full of nuggets and I'll bet you'll be the first one to quit punchin' cows and hit for the hills!"

"Pshaw!" Missouri smirked, "yuh like loafin' out there. I'll bet if yuh had a real job to do—"

"So you think it ain't work prospectin?" Goodall's hand went to his gun. "Well let me tell you. Prospectin' is a lot harder work than anything you do around here."

"Okeh, okeh, Goodall," Slim was more pacific as he again turned his attention to Calamity. "Listen Loco, this bein' a week before payday, me and some of the boys figgered—well, we thought we'd ride in to church services and we wanted to maybe make a little contribution. If maybe you could let me have ten dollars 'till payday—"

"What yuh give to the church is returned ten fold," Calamity said sadly. "So if yuh took my unlucky money and went to church and all that bad luck was returned ten fold to yuh—well, no I guess it wouldn't be doin' yuh a favor to lend yuh the money."

"Well then," Slim argued, "we could go in to Nellie's place for a round at roulette or maybe a hand of poker. Yuh won't be unlucky always Loco. Man's luck changes some time for sure."

LOCO JACK CALAMITY'S large blue eyes, always brooding and sad looked around the bunk house hopelessly, his wide shoulders seemed to droop forward into a sort of hump as though borne down by the ponderous despair which burdened their owner's mind. "I wish I could believe yuh Missouri but I know it ain't no use. I was borned unlucky and anyone who has anything to do with me is unlucky too. That's why I gotta have a little money saved up, just in case my bad luck gets any worse."

"Speaking of luck," the Dude spoke up. "It is largely what you make it Calamity. We are a product of our own thinking, what we fear most will surely happen and the law of compensation dictates that what we earn comes back to us, be it good or evil."

"What yuh say Mr. Belden," Calamity looked at the easterner with respect, "may be true. Yuh may be a perfesser at one of them collidges back east like yuh say, and yuh might have good reasons for comin' out here and punchin' cows: but I'm suspectin'—could yuh be runnin' away from a woman maybe?"

The Dude's face crimsoned and for a moment he looked awkward in the new cowboy clothes which he had recently purchased to become a temporary cowboy. Yet there was strength in his face, intelligence and a straight forwardness about him which would make him a man among men any place. "You're not so loco as some people try to say, Calamity," he grinned and mischief came into his brown eyes. "You trust me, don't you? Well, how about lending me the ten dollars and I'll dole it out two dollars apiece to the boys and we'll ride into town?"

"Mr. Belden," Calamity handed him the ten dollar bill, "I'd trust yuh with my last cent. I believe in what yuh say when yuh say yuh'll do somethin'; but as for that other—well, I still believe in luck and—" he hesitated thoughtfully, "and maybe a little horse sense," he added.

The boys rode away to spend the borrowed ten. The Kid, Calamity's constant companion, since he was still too young to enjoy men's pleasures, stayed behind. Goodall, the old prospector shook hands with Calamity as a prelude to returning to the hills. "This time Calamity, I'm goin' to hit it. I'll make us both rich. This time your luck is goin' t'change and they'll say you're the luckiest fella in the world!"

"If I did get rich," Calamity mourned. "I'd probably founder myself in some of the good things I've always wanted. I heard of a fella once got rich all of a sudden. All the time he'd had a hunger for cherries so when he got his money he bought a gallon pail full and et 'em

and died. His money didn't do him any good."

"Well," Goodall laughed, "you're probably right; but it's wine, women and song for me, founderin' or no founderin' as you say. I'll drink a barrel clean to the bottom and as for the other things, I'd a heap rather die by havin' than by not havin'."

"See, what did I tell you, Kid?" Calamity warned the Kid as Goodall left. "Men can't stand prosperity. Just hopin' and strivin' like he is he's happy; give him a rich strike and God only knows what will happen to him. It's not just havin' money that is good for a man; it's what he does with it to make others happy. Now to make people happy by givin' 'em foolish pleasure, ain't doin' 'em any good, 'cause foolish pleasure generally ends up in foolish misery. I learnt a long time ago never t'lend money for pleasure. Don't pay, and makes yuh enemies. Now if a man was hungry I'd share my last cent. They call me Loco, but if you're askin' me, I ain't the only one who's loco. Everybody's loco, and blind besides. The truth is they like t'fool theirselves into thinkin' they got good sense. Now just open your eyes and take a good look around—do yuh see very much in this old world but misery? What does anyone want to live for?"

"Well, I dunno," the Kid shook his head doubtfully, "but Mr. Belden says maybe it's best t'let the sands run out to see what happens next. He says we know what this old world will be like. And do yuh know what he says about you?"

"Mr. Belden is a smart man," Calamity agreed. "There's some truth in what he says. What did he say about me?"

"He said if you was crazy," the Kid told him candidly, "that you're crazy like a fox."

"Thinks I'm foxy eh?" Calamity's wide slit of a mouth turned up slightly at the corners. "Well, maybe so, but he don't believe in luck and he's wrong in that, Kid. I've got to be foxy with all the unlucky things the Lord has heaped on me. Why I'm so unlucky that I ain't sure if even the three way chance would work. Ain't been able to figger out a better way though."

"What's this three way chance yuh mention?" The Kid asked with a little worried frown.

"I'll tell yuh one of these days when I'm really sure I'm as unlucky as I think I am." And with those words he went out to walk alone, his head slightly bowed and his huge frame slightly stooped, as though even his great strength could not withstand the burdens of his mind.

CALAMITY was combing the dry washes and ravines for strays about ten miles east of the home ranch the following Saturday when the Kid came galloping up bringing his horse to a rearing stop. "He's hit it!" He shouted. "Goodall found gold, you're rich! All the boys are quittin' and headin' for the hills as soon as yuh get back to the ranch. Your luck has changed Calamity; you're the luckiest man in the world!"

"Now wait a minnit," Calamity wiped his perspiring brow with his neckerchief. "Yuh say Goodall found gold? Where?"

"In Arrowhead Wash," the Kid responded his dark eyes bright with excitement. "Can I go with you Calamity? Can I?"

"Best see what the situation is first," Calamity responded with a tremor in his voice. "Boys can't just up and quit Old Man Anderson without givin' notice. What does the Old Man say about it?"

There was a tense silence in the bunk house when the Kid and Calamity arrived. Old Man Anderson sat angrily at the table his mustache bristling, his blue eyes blazing. "No," he shouted. "Nary a cent until yuh finish your day and give me thirty days notice. I'm not payin' yuh t'go huntin gold."

"Where's Goodall?" Calamity demanded.

"Old Man run him off," Missouri Slim responded. "Show him the gold Belden. Show him the gold he left for Calamity."

For a minute or two Calamity forgot to think of being unlucky; he forgot about all his bad times and misadventures. He even forgot that his sweetheart had quit him for a gambler. A new hope seemed to light up his face. "Gold!" He managed to say, "Gold! And part of it's mine!"

"It looks like your luck has changed Calamity," Belden encouraged smoothly, "but what about us? We've been your pals, when your luck got too bad we were always here to encourage you, give you a pat on the back. Are you going to let us down?"

"Why no," Calamity replied a little frown on his simple solemn countenance. "Why no, I never let anyone down. What can I do?"

"Why you've got some gold there," Belden indicated the pouch full of nuggets, "and you've got a thousand or so in the bank. The Old Man won't pay us our wages because we're quittin' on him so suddenly. It's up to you Calamity. It's up to you."

"Come on boys," Calamity shouted as the idea drove home into his mind. "Pack your war bags. I'll grub stake the lot of yuh! Let's go!"

Old Man Anderson, sitting alone and in anger started to speak, swallowed his chewing tobacco, was struck with a spell of coughing and left the bunk house. He was speechless and in a helpless rage; but the looks he gave his cowboys and especially Loco Jack Calamity boded them no good.

Goodall's claim in Arrowhead Wash appeared little different from those above and below which the other cowboys immediately began to work; but the practiced eye of the old prospector had located a ledge of rock running transversely across the wash. Part of this he claimed for himself, the rest of it became the claim of his partner who had now acquired a new name, a paradox: "Lucky Jack Calamity!"

Water being scarce, under Belden's supervision and with his enthusiasm and encouragement a dam was constructed across a narrow gorge above with crude gates which could be opened and closed. "That way," Belden explained, "we'll let the water accumulate while we're sleeping and use it during the day."

But to Missouri Slim to whom this was hard work with no pay, such effort was galling. The pain was now transferred from the seat of his pants to the small of his back leaving him almost a cripple. "There's a better way than this," he sank back on a huge boulder, "up on the divide a thousand years ago or so, the Indians turned half of this creek over on the other side of the mountain to irrigate their fields. Ain't no reason why we couldn't turn it back."

"Wouldn't be fair," Calamity responded solemnly. "Wasn't fair to the old Man as it is, all of us quittin' him like we did. Wouldn't be fair to take his water too. You know as well as I do that all his cattle on the other side are watered from the water holes fed by part of this creek."

"With the dam we can make out," Belden agreed. "No use being a hog."

"Let him bring his cattle over on this side then," Missouri grumbled. "It would serve him right for not payin' us our wages. I've worked on this mud puddle of yours Belden until my back is plumb broke."

SO WITH pain and sweat, grumbling and laughing, chaffing and squabbling the dam was built, sluice boxes constructed and put into place, lean-tos built, and finally the claims were put into operation. But alas! Mother earth, prodigal with some, was perverse and stingy with others. Of all the claims on Arrowhead Wash, the only ones with big pay were those of Goodall and Lucky Jack Calamity! The rest yielded only fine gold with occasionally tiny nuggets perhaps as large as grains of wheat. If such was found the dwindling hopes of the cowboys turned miners were revived. Some grumbled that they would have been better off at forty and found with the Old Man, which was probably true, yet such is the lure of gold, the hope of hitting a rich pocket, that none of them really would have quit the venture unless driven to do so by dire necessity.

And while the others grumbled and found mining on such a scale a poor wage for the effort expended, Calamity, profiting by Goodall's experience, worked like a maniac and followed the ledge Goodall had indicated. Each night they divided their gold like a couple of thieves and as quietly and secretly hid their wealth. "No use tellin' anyone how much we got," Goodall warned. "If they only knew, our lives wouldn't be worth that," and he snapped his fingers significantly.

The stoop came out of Calamity's shoulders, he held his head high now and there was a look about him of great power. He laughed often and his voice rang out clear and strong encouraging the others. Sometimes he would take some of his own gold and give the others a hand. "Yuh just don't hold your mouth right," he'd say. "Now let me show yuh." And sure enough, when the sluices were cleaned, there would be some small nuggets to encourage the man he had helped. When Goodall remonstrated and called him crazy, he kept his own counsel and remembered what Belden had said about him: "Crazy like a fox," and when he hid his gold out behind his lean-to beneath a huge boulder, he was careful he was not followed or observed.

Then in the middle of the night, Calamity came out of a sound sleep with his gun in his hand. "Don't shoot Calamity, it's me, the Kid. I did what yuh told me and kept my ears open. The Old Man's hired some gun slingers t'work on the ranch. I don't know what's up but I think he means trouble for you boys."

"Thanks Kid," Calamity's hand found the Kid's in the darkness. "Yuh did well. We'll be prepared, and don't forget, when I've cleaned up here I'm sendin' yuh away to school."

"Okeh, Calamity," the Kid was enthusiastic, "I'll remember. Hope your luck holds out!"

What might have happened if the Kid hadn't warned them is hard to say. In Goodall's and Calamity's opinions the Old Man couldn't have held the gun men he brought with him, for a gun is an inconvenience to a man at work with a pick and shovel and they would all have been unarmed when the Old Man and his gun men rode up. As it was they were a united front and ready like a pack of wolves with fangs bared to defy the fangs of the coyotes. "I've come," the Old Man said, "to pay you varmits your wages, and if I ever catch any of yuh on my ranch I'll shoot yuh down. And for the way yuh treated me, I'll guarantee you'll never get another job in this part of the country."

Suspiciously, the men advanced and got their wages, each keeping his hand close to his gun as he did so. "Thanks Mr. Anderson, thanks a lot." Was the only comment.

"I always pay my debts," the Old Man said ominously when the last man had received his pay. "Always pay my debts," and he glared at Calamity.

"With shovels, Mr. Anderson?" Calamity asked mildly. "What yuh plannin' on Mr. Anderson? Figgerin' t'do a little prospectin'?"

"You'll find out," the Old Man responded cunningly, "come on boys, let's go!" And with that they rode on up the wash.

IT WAS mid afternoon before the results of Old man Anderson's expedition became actually evident to the gold diggers. If Calamity had suspected he had said nothing until sure but there was resolution in his face when he returned from a look at the dam. "They've cut our water off boys," he said angrily. "We can't even pan gold without water. Do yuh want to hang on here and fight or yuh goin' t'run like a bunch of scared coyotes?"

"We'll fight," sang out the crowd. "Just name it. We're behind yuh Calamity!"

"Where's Belden?" Calamity demanded.

"Gone to town for some supplies," Missouri Slim responded. "If yuh got any ideas Calamity, let me in on 'em."

"Okeh Slim," Calamity ordered, "get a pack mule and a keg of pow-

der. We'll go up there and turn that water back this way so even the Indians couldn't change it back!"

Goodall stepped forward. "Listen Calamity," he started to speak as he grabbed Calamity's arm. "It's no use. I've been goin' t'tell yuh for a week now—it's not worth the—"

Impatiently Calamity shook him off. There was a gleam of resolution in his eyes as his jaw was set firmly. "This is between me and Old Man Anderson," he snapped the words out. "I'll show the old coot he can't get away with it even if he does have a gang of gun men t'back him. I'm goin' after water, and luck or no luck I'm goin' t'have it!"

The sun was setting when they returned triumphantly to the diggings to find everything in a state of confusion. Belden had returned and immediately Calamity was confronted with the news. "They've struck 'er rich at Crazy Creek, Calamity, get packed up. They're pickin' up nuggets the size of marbles!" Calamity went to Belden who was putting his things on a pack mule. "That's right Calamity, we're leavin'. Soon as I get packed I'll give you a hand with your stuff."

"I started to tell yuh Calamity," Goodall came up at the moment, "but yuh wouldn't listen. This place has petered out. It ain't worth workin' any more; but up at Crazy Creek—

"You're all a bunch of cowards," Calamity snarled as he turned away. "You're afraid t'stay and face the music. The Old Man bluffed yuh out. Well, he can't bluff me!"

So Calamity stayed and the others rode away, as all who are bitten by the gold bug; and hopeful that they would strike it rich in the new field; they made solemn promises to repay him the money he had loaned them. Empty promises. Calamity sat alone on a round boulder and smoked and brooded and from long habit his head began to sink deeper into his shoulders with the depression of his spirits. His conviction that he was the unluckiest man in the world became stronger and the gold he had hidden beneath the large rock behind his camp could not alleviate the feeling. The stream of water which he had returned to its course gurgled and laughed and seemed to mock him.

The next day Calamity rode to town after supplies. As he had plenty of gold in his poke for his needs he did not even go near his cache beneath the large rock. Covetous eyes might be watching. It was a clear hot day, the bees were beeing, the birds were birding or whatever birds do and nature smiled; but Calamity did not smile. He turned several times and looked suspiciously over his shoulder but could see nothing out of the ordinary.

By the time he had reached town, large black thunderheads were piling up ominously in the west adding to his anxiety. By the time he had made his purchases lightning was ripping the sky and a desert storm ravaged the countryside. Nature does not do anything in half way measures in that country. If it blows it takes the earth with it, if it rains it washes it away and when the sun shines it is like a kiln, drying the earth into the hardness of brick. Naturally Calamity stayed in town that night.

But on his return, Arrowhead Wash was no longer as he had known it. A mountain of mud and rock had come down in the storm and taken with it all evidence of the placer claims. Uprooted trees and rocks the size of a house protruding above the mud attested the fury of the storm, and a mortar ten feet deep had covered forever the secret hiding place of Calamity's gold!

The Kid found him in a saloon in town at a table in a secluded corner playing solitaire. For a long time he just sat there watching Calamity who, though aware of his presence, did not look up. "Well, the Old Man's as mad as a hornet," the Kid said finally. "Those gun-men he hired to plunder you fellows was disappointed in not gettin' any gold. They run off with a hundred head of the Old Man's cattle. Belden said what yuh do comes back to yuh—it's the law of compen something."

"Don't believe in it," Calamity responded mournfully. "I admit I changed the course of that stream

back to where it was before the Indians divided it, but—nope, I'm just plain unlucky."

So he started all over again with the thousandth telling of his tale of woe, adding now the crowning indignity of a perverse fate in the loss of his gold and ended up mentioning the three way chance. "What is this three way chance yuh're always mentionin'?" The Kid persisted.

"Well it's this way," Calimity replied. "If a man was to think of killin' his self, he's got three usual ways of doin' it. Shootin', hangin' or drowndin'. Now the three way chance takes in all of 'em the way I got it figgered. I'd go find a tree over-hangin' a river, then I'd tie a rope around my neck and shoot myself. If the bullet didn't kill me and the rope didn't break my neck, tied like that I'd fall in the river and drownd. If you're goin' to do a thing like that, do a good job."

"But you don't mean it seriously, do yuh Calamity?"

"Aw heck," Calamity shrugged, "it just wouldn't work. Why do yuh know what? I'm so unlucky the limb would break just at the second I pulled the trigger and then the rope would slip off and I'd fall in the water and have to walk home in wet clothes!"

THE END

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Pistol Manners

by Chuck Martin

(author of "Pistol Law For Purgatory")

Colonel Calhoun and Major Cordwaite, the best of friends, had parted but were to meet on the field of honor . . . while the town stood silently by, watching two brave, foolish old-timers . . .

COLONEL Driscoll Calhoun stood tall and erect at the long bar of the *Texas House*. Major Percy Cordwaite was drinking from the same bottle of blended whiskey with the Colonel. The regular trade gave scant attention to the two old Army officers until the Colonel raised his quavering voice in uncourteous anger.

"You, Major Cordwaite, Suh, are a liar! General Price did the proper thing at the battle of Johnson's Crossing. He never gave an order for retreat all during the late war between the States!"

The Colonel was a tall spare man in his middle sixties, and his suit of Confederate gray had been tailored to Army specifications. His manners and temper were those of an Alabama aristocrat who had never admitted defeat.

Major Cordwaite was also tall but stocky of build, with the florid complexion common to British Army officers who have spent much of their lives either in Egypt or India. His stubborn jaw told of a fighting heart, and the glint in his blue eyes spoke of a courage that would never grow less.

"You, Sir, have forgotten your manners, Calhoun," he reminded the Colonel bluntly. "You have passed the lie to me, and I await your instant retraction. Harumph!"

Some towns are like houses, which take on the characteristics of the people who live in them. Tidewater drew fighting men from all walks of life, just as a magnet attracts all discarded bits of metal containing iron or steel.

Cowboys from the back brush country to the north; brawny sailors from the sail and steam vessels which plied the coastal trade along the Gulf. Tidewater had its wharves and cattle-pens, water-front saloons, and the Quality bars where fighting men congregated to fight the battles of many lands, again and again.

At a table near a side door, Doc Saunders nudged John Tucker, editor of the *Tidewater Gazette*. Both men had passed their prime, but neither had retired as had the Colonel and Major.

"This time it means fight," the old Medico whispered to Tucker. "I'll patch up their scratches and bruises, and you should get a front-page story. Those two old mossy-horns mean to go to war, unless I mis-read the signs!"

At the end of the bar, Colonel Calhoun drew his tough old frame erect. His left hand stroked the snowy mustaches which framed stern, stubborn lips. He held a pair of skin gauntlet gloves in his right hand.

"General Price was reforming his lines," he stated in his slow southern drawl. "By Gad, Suh, his buglers did not know the call for retreat!"

"You have insulted an officer of her Majesty's fighting forces," Major Cordwaite repeated coldly. "You will apologize instantly, or I shall consider your remarks as an affront to my personal honor!"

"I shall retract, Suh," the Colonel answered courteously. "The very moment in which you admit that General Price never ordered a retreat!"

"Price was out-numbered five-to-one," Major Cordwaite replied, and there was no give to his erect carriage. "He escaped with half of his command; a masterly maneuver. Those who did not retreat are there yet!"

Colonel Calhoun stiffened like a Corporal on dress parade. His right arm lashed out, and his gloves slapped Major Cordwaite on the left cheek, leaving welts of angry red in their wake.

"That for your insult, Suh!" the Colonel barked.

Major Cordwaite bunched his muscles for a leap, and then he slowly relaxed. He shifted a boot behind him, executed a flawless about-face, and marched stiffly to the table where Doc Saunders was talking with Editor John Tucker.

"Tucker, my dear fellow, you will act for me?" the Major asked the graying Editor, and reached for his wallet. "You will present my card to that old scoundrel with my compliments. We will meet on the field of Honor, and I, Sir, am in your debt!"

"Now look, Major," Tucker began, in an effort to placate the angry Britisher. "You and the Colonel have been fighting the battles of two great nations for more than twenty years. You are both gentlemen and soldiers, and two finer men never honored the State of Texas with their presence. Allow Doc Saunders to use his good offices with the Colonel."

Major Cordwaite drew the fingers of his left hand across the livid welts on his cheeks. "Nothing but blood will erase the public insult which that blackguard has inflicted on me," he said in a low tense voice. "You will await on my enemy, Mr. Tucker?"

Old Colonel Calhoun reached for the bottle on the bar. His eyes glittered as he smashed the almost full bottle against the brass rail, beckoned to the bartender, and ordered a new bottle. Then he dashed both glasses to the floor and cupped his left hand. The bartender opened a new quart, gauged the distance with

a practised eye, and slid the bottle down the smooth mahogany where it came to rest within the cupped fingers of the Colonel's steady left hand. The glass followed and stopped within an inch of the bottle, and Colonel Calhoun poured a drink and tossed it down neat.

Doc Saunders excused himself, pushed erect, and walked over to the Colonel. Doc was nearing seventy, and his snowy hair was thinning under his neat black Stetson.

"I am at your service, Colonel," he said simply, and saluted the stern old Southerner. "I was in your regiment during the late war between the States. Command me, Suh!"

"Thank you kindly, my dear Doctor," Calhoun murmured. "You will be my personal representative. You will find me at my estate, and my adversary has the choice of weapons. Thank you, and Good day, Suh!"

The Colonel saluted smartly, and walked slowly from the *Texas House*. Doc Saunders poured himself a drink from the Colonel's bottle, sipped slowly, and waited for the inevitable.

JOHN TUCKER watched until Major Cordwaite had left the room, after which he walked slowly to the bar and cleared his throat. Doc Saunders turned slowly and bowed from the hips.

"I have the honor to represent Colonel Calhoun," he said with quiet dignity.

"The choice of weapons rests with my principal," Tucker stated. "He has chosen pistols."

"Splendid," Doc Saunders answered enthusiastically. "In spite of his years, the Colonel is one of the fastest men with a Colt pistol in Texas, and his accuracy is well known."

"That's right, Doc," Tucker agreed with a wintry smile. "The Major is not so good on the draw-and-shoot with the old Colt .45 six-shooter. He has chosen duelling pistols at ten paces, with a referee to make the count. Both men raise their pistols at the count of one. They take aim at the count of two, and they press triggers at the count of three. The pistols hold one bullet, and should they miss, the referee will re-load the weapons. Kindly communicate with your principal, Colonel Calhoun, and tell him the duel has been set for sundown at precisely six. The place will be just outside the *Texas House* where the insult was committed," and John Tucker bowed stiffly. Then he whispered without raising his head. "Try to get that old fire-eater to unsay his remarks."

"Sorry, John," Doc Saunders answered, also in a whisper. "Like the Colonel said, none of Price's men ever learned the call for retreat. Until sundown then."

* * *

Doc Saunders rode thoughtfully to Calhoun's little cattle-ranch three miles from Tidewater. Slavery had been abolished for more than twenty years, but the Colonel's old valet and butler, George, had refused to leave his master. He and his wife, Martha, looked after the rambling old house, while their two stalwart sons herded the cattle and did the ranch work.

Saunders found the Colonel sitting on the wide gallery which surrounded the house on three sides. The Colonel had seen the old Medico riding through the lane of trees, and two tall glasses waited on a little table at the Colonel's right arm. He arose, bowed stiffly, and indicated a chair.

"Let us drink to the confusion of our enemies, Saunders," he drawled carelessly. "Then you can tell me the terms."

Doc Saunders drank his julep slowly, and with a grave face. The Colonel had brought all the traditions of Alabama to his run-down ranch in Texas. The furniture in the old house was shabby and worn, but the Colonel was always immaculate in his linens and tailored suits.

"You, Suh, seem strangely downcast," he chided Doc Saunders gently. "I have met five men on the field of honor, and have been wounded but

once. This foreigner won't be any different."

"Begging your pardon, Colonel, but Major Cordwaite retired from the British Army with an unblemished record," Saunders answered slowly. "He is an excellent pistol shot, and he has walked from the field of honor on three occasions, without a scratch."

"The fellow is a gentleman," the Colonel admitted without hesitation. "But I am quicker on the draw. Tell me the place and the hour."

"The hour of sundown, at six, in front of the *Texas House*," Saunders murmured with a sigh.

"I could not have wished for a better setting or hour," the Colonel murmured, and his fine old face expressed his satisfaction. "Another drink, George," he called to the colored butler. "And lay out fresh linen for me."

Reaching under the table, the Colonel picked up a worn shell-studded belt, with a heavy single-action Colt six-shooter in the moulded holster. Setting the hammer on half cock, he spun the cylinder, closed the loading gate, and hefted the balanced weapon.

"I can sever the head from a cotton-mouthed moccasin at forty paces," he told Doc Saunders with a trace of pride. "Look yonder at that tree in the bayou where the big branch almost touches the water."

Saunders turned his head and followed the Colonel's pointing gun. The Bayou ran back into the swamp for miles, but the house was built upon high ground not more than thirty yards from the still green water. Saunders jerked when a terrific explosion bellowed from the Colonel's forty-five caliber Colt. A brown snake as thick as a man's arm was writhing on the branch, and the headless body fell into the water before the gun-shot echoes had died away.

Colonel Calhoun was standing tall and erect with the pistol at his side. A gun-fighter's halo of black powder-smoke hovered over his thick white hair, and the smile on the Colonel's face was almost beautific.

"Major Percy Cordwaite won't be any different, Suh," he told Doc Saunders, and deftly holstered his smoke-grimed gun.

"Sorry, Colonel," the old Doctor contradicted, and the droop in his voice matched the sag of his broad shoulders. "Major Cordwaite has chosen duelling pistols at ten paces. Your speed won't give you any advantage."

"Advantage, Suh? Who asked for any advantage?" the Colonel blustered fiercely, but some of the confidence had fled from his face. "Outrageous, Suh," he complained bitterly. "Those duelling pistols are usually caliber thirty-two. They won't even knock a man down. Did you reason with the scoundrel?"

"I talked to the Major's second," Saunders said dully. "John Tucker is acting for the Major, and they had the choice of weapons, and likewise the time and place." Doc Saunders

twisted uneasily in his chair. "It is not too late to send a note of..."

"Hush your fuss, Suh!" the Colonel roared. "I have never retreated; I won't retreat now. At one minute after six, Major Percy Cordwaite, late of her Majesty's Army in India, will be a dead man. It is only one o'clock now. Will you honor me with your presence at dinner, Doctor Saunders, Suh?"

JOHN TUCKER walked slowly up a side street to a neat little house of white-washed adobe. A picket fence marked the boundaries of Major Cordwaite's three-acre piece, and the Major's big sorrel gelding was grazing in the back pasture.

Tucker walked through the gate and climbed the steps of the small porch. He lifted a knocker on the door and rapped lustily, and a wry smile twisted his lips when a stout man opened the door and spoke respectfully. Tucker knew Graves, who served the Major as man of all work, but who called himself the Butler of Cordwaite Manor.

"Hit's a pleasure to see you, Guv'nor," he greeted the Editor in his thick Cockney speech. "The Major is waiting in his study."

Tucker held his hat behind him and brushed past the frowning butler. Major Cordwaite sprang to his feet as Tucker walked into a big room whose walls were lined with shelves of books. Crossed cavalry sabers were fastened over a mantle, with curious Oriental weapons scattered around with studied disarray.

"I shall speak to Graves for not announcing you, Mister Tucker," the Major apologized. "Beastly careless of him."

"About the Colonel," Tucker began bluntly. "Isn't there some way we can avoid an actual draw-and-shoot?"

"Eh? Do I hear you correctly, Tucker? Are you suggesting that I should apologize to that stubborn old rebel who does not know when he is whipped?"

"Down here in Texas it's what you might call *'making your manners'*, and it would save a nasty mess," Tucker explained hesitantly. "You and the Colonel have been good friends for many years."

"I am grateful because you used the past tense," the Major answered gruffly. "I'll make my manners on the field of honor with a duelling pistol."

"Well, have it your way," Tucker said with a sigh. "The hour is six o'clock sundown; the place in front of the *Texas House*. I will meet you there."

* * *

Long John Bates was Justice of the Peace, and a Virginian by birth. He was also the unanimous choice of the two old soldiers as referee. Now he waited at the corner of the *Texas House* as the brassy Texas sun slanted low in the west. With crossed gun-belts cinched around his lean hips, and a suggestion of sadness on his weathered face.

The Judge knew both principals well, and liked them impartially. But Honor was something which transcended friendship, or any other human virtue.

Four hundred men lined both sides of the street; silent, hard-faced men who wore low-slung six-shooters as part of their dress. Aristocrats, and killers from the back country; they always settled their disputes of honor according to the code of old Judge Colt.

A low murmur whispered from the crowd when two men appeared at the east end of the street where Percy Cordwaite lived in solitary comfort and privacy. A second whispered sigh was heard when two men appeared at the west end of the street on a pair of blooded horses. The horsemen stopped and dismounted, and one of them removed a gleaming pair of Cavalry spurs from his polished boots.

Long John Bates pushed away from the porch column, stretched back his wide shoulders, and twitched the guns in his twin holsters. He walked to the edge of the board-walk and waited for the two pairs of men to lessen the

distance between them. The Judge carried a flat box under his left arm, which he laid on the board curbing between his big boots.

The Major was dressed in tailored whipcords, with polished English riding boots covering the laced legs of his light riding breeches. He carried a riding crop in his left hand which he handed to Tucker as he halted on a military one-two.

Colonel Calhoun came to a halt at the same time, and saluted smartly. His suit was the inevitable Confederate gray, with the tails of his coat cut long. His neatly pressed trousers were tucked down inside knee-length, high-heeled Texas boots. Polished by old George until they shone like burnished metal. The Colonel stripped the riding gauntlets from his long-fingered hands and passed them to Doc Saunders.

Saunders and Tucker faced each other, nodded one time, and walked toward Long John Bates. Doc Saunders placed his black bag on the curb near the flat box, which Bates picked up and slowly opened. He presented the box to Doc Saunders across his left elbow, and indicated the two duelling pistols with a thrust of his rugged chin.

"Take your choice of weapons, Doc," he told the old Medico. "They are identical twins." He waited until Saunders had picked up one of the beautiful guns; presented the other to John Tucker. "You know the rules, gentlemen," he drawled softly. "If they are violated in any manner, the culprit will answer to me and my guns!"

Bates waited until the two seconds had retraced their steps, and had handed the duelling pistols to the two old soldiers. Then Long John elbowed his coat-tails back and shelled his own Peacemaker Colt .45's into his ham-like hands.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" he asked clearly.

Two heads nodded without hesitation, and their seconds withdrew to the curb. Not a sound disturbed the stillness which seemed to drench the moment of sundown. Long John looked at his big silver watch,

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shifted the cocked guns in his big hands, and threw back his shaggy head.

"One!"

The two old soldiers stood tall and straight, and their right arms came up slowly to a level with their shoulders.

"Two!"

Two right thumbs eared back the hammers of the long-barreled duelling pistols; two steady right eyes squinted down the barrels to catch the silver-tip beads squarely in the notched sights.

Long John seemed to hesitate slightly as a suggestion for either man to indicate a change of heart. But both were soldiers with a lifetime of fighting behind them, and neither hand wavered so much as the width of a fine hair. Long John sighed as he was filling his lungs with air, and then he gave the Texas Go-ahead.

"Three!"

BEFORE THE echoes of his deep voice had died away, two pistols barked sharply in a one-shot blend. Right arms lowered two smoking pistols with swift military precision, and with something suggesting that but little time remained in which to observe all the traditions of duelling Honor.

Major Cordwaite swayed gently to the left with a grim smile twitching his tight lips. His right boot moved back a step and scuffed up a small cloud of red dust, but he remained stiffly erect, watching his opponent.

Colonel Driscoll Calhoun stomped his polished left boot to stop the swing of his body. His left arm jerked out suddenly as though pulled by a string. Catching his balance, he clicked his heels and came to attention. There was a gleaming devil of delight in his smiling eyes as he stared at the Major and gave a soft command.

"Forward... March!"

The two old officers moved as one man. They marched straight toward each other, met and whipped into a *"column by twos"*, and continued together to the wooden curb where Long John Bates waited with hands folded across his deep chest. The cocked pistols in the Judge's hands pointed up over his wide shoulders, and Long John holstered them and bowed from the hips.

Doc Saunders moved closer when he saw the drip of crimson from the left hands of both gladiators. Judge Bates bent his knees and picked up the flat box, opened the lid, and extended it to Colonel Calhoun across the crook of his left elbow. The Colonel placed his smoke-grimed weapon gently in the box, and watched while Major Cordwaite followed his example. Then the two old soldiers faced each other and saluted smartly.

"Has your Honor been satisfied, Suh?" the Colonel asked politely.

"It has, Sir," the Major answered gruffly. "I trust that I have given you a lesson in pistol manners."

"Another lesson would be fatal," the Colonel said soberly. "I never used a gun so light, and I threw off my shot to the outside. I take it, Suh, that you are wounded in the left arm."

"Just a scratch like your own wound," Major Cordwaite admitted ruefully. "My favorite weapon is the service 45 calibre. And Colonel?"

"Yes, Major Cordwaite?"

"I've been reading a history of the war between the States, written by a gentleman from Natchez. Mississippi. General Price never did surrender. He merely withdrew to reform his lines. My apologies, Colonel!"

A sudden change came over the old Colonel. His shoulders drooped as he leaned forward to stare intently into the Major's face. Then he smiled and extended his right hand.

"You, Suh, are a gentleman and a scholar, Major Cordwaite," he said earnestly. "I have a special bottle in the *Texas House*. Shall we repair to the bar and drink to our undying friendship?"

THE END

Bar-Room Bonanza

Fact Feature by Lee Baldwin

ED VINCENT, a pack string operator, leaned idly against the old pine bar in Jack Anderson's saloon in Elk City, Idaho, on a wet spring day early in 1895 and absently watched the big Swede proprietor do a bit of tidying up.

Anderson had removed the felt matting from under the gold scales at one end of the bar and had set fire to it. The mat was giving off a sickening stench.

"Why don't you burn that stinking thing outside?" Vincent asked. "You're liable to run off all your cash trade."

Anderson shot him a pained look, probed into the ashes and came out with something which he dropped on the bar in front of Vincent. It was a nugget about the size of a pea. Anderson was grinning.

"Purty good, huh? Residue from the gold dust that's passed across them scales uh mine. That mat grabs it. Some button, huh? Every so often I get one like this."

Vincent laughed. "Jack, reckon I'd stake out a claim in your saloon, but the roof leaks too bad."

It was raining outside. Water dripped through the roof which was sieved with hundreds of bullet holes put there by celebrating miners, gold-camp toughs, and anyone else with a gun and the inclination. About as many six-shooter slugs had been fired in the rough, boot-scarred floor, and the rain water leaked on through under the building.

Vincent studied the course of the water reflectively for a few moments. He was remembering a remark Anderson had made a few days before. The Swede had wanted to put in new flooring, repair the porch and patch the roof. But he didn't have the time to do the job himself.

The saloon was in an old building, built shortly after the first placer discovery in 1861 at the bottom of Ternan Hill, near the mouth of Glass Gulch. From then on the Elk Basin country had been fabulously rich placer ground, a Midas magnet, its pull felt the world over.

Vincent's pack outfit was temporarily idle. "Tell you what," he said, thinking about the matting under Anderson's scales and the possible residue from all the gold flung across the old bar. "If I can get somebody to help, I'll do that repair work you want. Reckon it'll be a while 'fore I can get out on the trail anyway. If that button you got's any indication, there might be more gold hid out around here."

It was agreeable with Anderson. Vincent knew just the man to help him, a Chinese named Bok Sing. Bok Sing was quite a rounder and sport in Elk City but he was a shrewd man and a good worker. He operated a laundry part time and worked a few placer claims. Like the other celestials, he was painfully careful and could lease a supposedly worked-out claim from its white owner and make it pay all over again.

In Bok Sing's laundry shack Vincent explained the deal he had made. At first the Chinese was skeptical, but when he was told about the little gold button Anderson had found, he forgot the steaming tub of clothes he was working over. "Bok Sing likee fin' gold. No likee washee glo's alla time. Can' make much money."

They rigged up a sluice box handy and went to work removing the bullet-riddled floor boards of the bar-room and porch. The dirt underneath was carefully washed over the riffles.

When they cleaned up, the yield was $120 in dust. Bok Sing was plenty excited, but Vincent was thinking of the best way to get what gold there might be from the bullet-gouged, hob-nail pitted pine flooring. Those rough planks would have gold all right, but he felt the big strike was over. It would be a tough job cleaning that lumber in the sluice box.

But Bok Sing had been sizing things up, too. "Wait few day now, Missy Vincen'," he said. "Bok Sing fixee. Sen' fo' assit on a China sto', Lew'ton."

The special kind of "assit" from Lewiston's Chinese store came up the trail by pack train, and Vincent and the Chinaman went to work with it. They got results, more than either had expected. Those battered boards yielded up $720 in dust and tiny nuggets.

Besides getting the repair work done, Jack Anderson came in for a third of the gold and for several days free drinks sloshed across his bar. Bok Sing closed up his laundry and celebrated, but he would never tell what kind of acid he had gotten from his countrymen in Lewiston. That didn't worry Ed Vincent; he was tired of town life and wanted to hit the trails with his mules.

Besides, there were no other deadfalls in Elk City with enough bullet holes to make a repair job worth while.

Kansas Tornado

by John Lackland

(author of "Dead Man's Hand")

He was like a tornado, the stranger who called himself Kansas. But was he fighting Shallicross, or just here to bolster up old Eli's rotten regime?

HE CAME at sundown, riding as if the devil himself was behind him, and his horse was of the same caliber. He came into the stable, dismounted, and asked me to take care of the black horse, standing there as if his thoughts were a thousand miles away.

"Where you from, stranger?" I asked, for the light was fading and my eyes are none too good.

"Kansas," he said, and the way he said it, I knew it was better not to ask any more about that.

"Riding through?" That was legitimate enough to ask, because it would make a difference in how I'd care for the horse.

"Staying," he said. He turned his eyes toward me, but he wasn't looking at me; he was looking through me. And his voice had a hollow ring to it, like I was hearing it in a big cave with lots of echo. "You know Eli Shallicross?"

I was watching his eyes then, and there was hate blazing in them, hate like I never dreamed could be in a man's eyes; but the expression on his face otherwise was calm as new-fallen snow, and there was no other emotion in him.

"Sure," I told him. "You can find him at the Mercantile; he's always there this time of night."

"Thanks," he said. He reached down into his levis and took out a pouch, tossed it to me. "Take good care of the horse, mister; if that ain't enough, just let me know, and I'll give you more."

Enough! That little pouch was heavy, so heavy it made my hands tremble. I fumbled with the string on it and spilled golden coins out into my hands, more golden coins I'd ever dreamed of seeing these past twenty years. I hefted them in my hands and knew they were good. "This is more than enough, Mister..." I started.

"Kansas," he said. "That's all the name I got; reckon it'll do." He turned and walked out. And I thought of Eli Shallicross and the way he ruled this town with his loans, mortgages, skullduggery, and boughten law. Hate was in the man's eyes and he'd ridden a long way to find Shallicross. Maybe...just maybe ...justice had walked into my stable this night.

I took care of the black horse... that animal was a patrician if I ever saw one; he knew good treatment when he saw it, expected it, by grab. I was itching to get finished and try to see what was going to happen, but I couldn't slack my work—not for a gent who paid the way Kansas did, and not for a horse like the black.

THERE was no light in the Mercantile when I came that way; I guess I'd had hopes of doing some eavesdropping, and I was plumb disappointed to see it all dark there. Sort of strange, too, for Eli should have been there. I looked in the window, but couldn't see anything, and I reckon I was looking for a body. But Kansas wore guns, and he didn't look like a gent who'd use any other weapon; besides, my ears are all right—I'd have heard shots had there been any.

Maybe they'd both gone to the *Twin Eagles;* that thought came to me with a sort of sinking feeling,

Virgie used her riding whip on Bud Gilroy; she wasn't having any part of him.

because it would indicate that Kansas and old Eli were cooking something up together. I went in and up to the bar; there wasn't anyone around I didn't know, and neither Eli nor the stranger were in sight.

Ned was tending bar, and he came down, pushed a bottle over to me with a look on his face like he had something tremendous to tell.

"Read the Good Book recent, Jeff?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "Nope, but I recollect it pretty well."

"I was thinking of a passage in it tonight. Don't know exactly how it goes, but there's somethin' about gents sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind." He sighed long and deep. "And I seen a tornado come

in here tonight, a Kansas tornado."

I nodded and dropped a golden coin on the bar.

"Was he alone?"

Ned picked up the golden coin and smiled in that sardonic way of his. "Saw another like this tonight. And that ain't all." He dropped his voice to a whisper. "You got the right idea, old-timer; Kansas didn't come here alone. He came with Moneybags Eli and..." Ned's voice broke off as he glanced up. "There they are now, coming down stairs ...and look at Eli."

I turned around to see the pair trooping down, the stranger in the lead as if bullets would just bounce off his back. But it was Shallicross that got my attention.

Eli Shallicross I'd have judged as around fifty when I saw him this morning, a big hearty-looking man without any trace on the outside of what he was like underneath. Had the strength of a bull, though he never seemed to get any exercise outside of counting money. But tonight he looked like eighty, and he came down those stairs holding on the railing like he could just barely stand on his feet. His face wasn't ruddy any more; it was grey like dirty flour.

"He was like that when they come in," said Ned. "They been upstairs in a private room for about fifteen minutes."

Kansas walked along like he was the only man in town, looking nowhere except straight in front of him. He was through the batwing doors a full minute before Shallicross.

"Maybe he misses Virgie now," said Ned.

I nodded. Eli looked like he was completely alone, and I knew he hadn't a friend here. They knuckled under to him; they took his orders; his men took his money and did what they were told, but there was no such thing as personal loyalty with Shallicross. He never let anyone get close to him.

"Wonder if he appreciates her now," I said.

It was an idle question. Everyone loved Virgie, but she'd finally left her father, run off with some gent no one ever saw. No one had ever heard the full story, but we all knew how he'd treated her and no one blamed her for leaving.

And now Eli was shambling across the room to the doors, looking about him like he'd never seen the place before, his eyes resting briefly on each person here as if searching for something. I felt his look when it came to me and it was hard not to feel sorry. But I couldn't sympathize with Eli; it was just the sorry feeling you get when someone who could have been a great man turns out like Shallicross.

IT WASN'T more than two minutes later that we heard a shot outside. Funny, I'd been expecting this ever since Kansas rode in, yet it startled me. We all made for the doors. It was deadly quiet again by the time we were outside and there was a slight breeze ruffling the dust in the street.

The light spilled out from the saloon, gold as the coins in my pocket, and the breeze was blowing the wisps of smoke that drifted out of the barrel of Kansas' gun. He stood there looking at a form that lay in the street.

"He shot the Marshal," said Ned.

"Self defense, gents," came the stranger's voice. "This man tried to backshoot me."

Well, none of us cared for Shallicross' Marshal, but just the same, it ain't healthy to let the law be shot down like that. Kansas stood there, looking at us as if a star made no difference whatsoever. Then Shallicross spoke up, and there was just enough of the old authority in his voice to make us listen.

"Purdy hasn't been 'Town Marshal since this noon when he resigned... I sent for...this man to take his place."

The stranger reached out with his boot and turned the body over. There was no badge on the dead man's shirt.

"Any questions, gentlemen?" asked

the stranger, holstering his gun. No one had any. He looked over the lot of us. "Which one of you is Tom Hartley."

I looked at Ned and he licked his lips. Yeah, the stranger had come in like a tornado, and Shallicross' dirty Marshal had gone down like ripe wheat, but what difference would it make if the stranger were just going to administer Shallicross' deals more ruthlessly and efficiently than Purdy? I thought of another passage from the Good Book, something about a new king who met a delegation from the people asking for a better deal than they'd got from the old king, his father—and the young one told them that he'd make it still tougher for them than the old man had, and they'd better knuckle under —or else!

"Is Tom Hartley among you?" asked Kansas, he that had no name.

"Yeah, I'm Hartley," the gent referred to spoke up.

"You have a note that's due tomorrow."

Sure, Tom had a note that was due. It had been signed and sealed with all the so-called due process of law. It'd stand in any court, I guess. And the fact that the note was just the end-product of a long series of legal swindles was what a lawyer would call irrelevant. Or that Tom had been forced to sign it. No, it wasn't duress; no one had a gun at his back. Hartley was perfectly free to refuse to sign and just leave town with one suit of clothes on his back and maybe five bucks in his pocket if Shallicross felt generous.

"Yeah, it's due." Tom spoke lifelessly, like a man who knows he's going to be hung, no matter what.

"Tear it up." Kansas turned and started down the street. Tom gasped and looked toward Old Eli, as if he hadn't heard right. And Shallicross nodded shakenly.

THE NEXT morning, Kansas came into the stable for the black horse, and my guess was that he was riding out on the range to make some calls. There were others who had signed notes with Shallicross, under much the same conditions as had Tom Hartley.

There was one man in town who wouldn't take this lying down; that was Bud Gilroy, Shallicross' general manager. He was the one who did the dirty work, just calling in Purdy when it was necessary to make something look legal. Eli'd promised Bud he could have Virgie, and that was what finally made her break with the old man. She'd used her riding whip on Bud before she let out; she wasn't having any part of him. Gilroy'd been out of town yesterday, but he got back shortly after the late Purdy made his fatal mistake.

I saw three of Gilroy's crew saddle their horses and take the road out, shortly after Kansas left. They had carbines as well as short guns, and it didn't take much imagination to guess their mission. Kansas was going to have a fight on his hands, if he came back at all.

It was about noon that a single horseman came back into town, one arm dangling uselessly and blood on his face from a scalp wound. Gilroy came out of the Mercantile as the rider came in and helped him out of saddle.

"He...got Red and Pete...creased me..." Then the speaker collapsed and Gilroy called for help to get him to the sawbones. There was an ugly look on his face, but no sign of fear.

I waited for Kansas; he didn't show up. Gilroy would be waiting, too, and I knew Bud well enough to be sure there wouldn't be any face-to-face encounter if he could help it. Gilroy was the kind who could blow hot or cold as the occasion demanded; he didn't believe in exposing himself; he could be patient as a cat beside a mouse-hole.

I saw him come back from the sawbones' and go into the Mercantile. It was a long afternoon, not much happening. I managed to watch the street, hoping Kansas would get back before dark.

He didn't; I passed up supper and kept watching for a trace of Gilroy and the sound of a horseman coming. Then, of all a sudden, it came to me,

and I cussed myself up and down for a stupid jackass—with apologies to the jackass. Hell—of course Gilroy wouldn't come out on the street! He'd likely as not be waiting up on the roof of the Mercantile, waiting with a rifle. Kansas would pass that way, afoot or on horseback made no difference, and he'd be a target; Bud practised daily at targets.

I'd never been a gun-fighter, though there'd been times when I was a ranch-hand that I'd used a gun and had to use it with accuracy. But I knew I couldn't do any fancy shooting now—not even in the daytime. I'd have to get up close and hope I could hold my forty-five steady.

It was more habit than anything else that had kept me oiling my gun regular and making sure it was in shape. Hadn't had to take it out of the holster otherwise since I opened up the stable five years back. It hung there in a corner, where it could be reached easy if I needed it, but where it wouldn't be noticeable.

The grip still fitted into my hand all right, but it seemed heavier than the last time I'd shot it off—that must have been that Fourth-of-July celebration at Dogie town—and I decided not to strap the holster on. I stuck it into my pants top and it felt as if the bulge could be seen a mile away, but it wouldn't be too noticeable in the dark. I had to go slow and careful, because of my eyes.

THE MERCANTILE was right next to the restaurant; they both had flat roofs. I slipped around to the rear of the street, all the time listening for hoofbeats, and made my way toward the Merc, hoping I wouldn't stumble over anything. I heaved a sigh of relief when I came to the restaurant; that relief was a bit premature. Silas, the cook, had been building himself a mountain of old tin cans and whisky bottles; I stubbed my toe on one of the former, went sprawling with a clatter to wake Rip Van Winkle. Seemed like there was a lot of stars out tonight, then I heard Silas stirring around inside. Couldn't let him stagger out to investigate; he'd probably come out with his shotgun and cut loose in all directions.

I had a slash on my hand from one of those bottles and it hurt like the blazes. I felt like howling at the moon, then it came to me that one of the cats could have made a noise like this. So I opened up and tried to sound as much like a tomcat as I could; it made me feel better, and it convinced Silas, because I heard him mutter something about those damned cats and slam back into his bunk.

I tied my bandana around my wrist and tried to stop the bleeding as well as I could. And this was my gun-hand. Couldn't hold my forty-five now if my life depended on it.

Back when I punched cattle, I could shinny up a tree after a coon or possum pretty fair, but that was a long time ago, as I found when I upended the rain barrel, stood on it and grabbed hold of the roof ledge to pull myself up. Thought I was going to tear my arm right out of its socket—but somehow I managed to pull myself up. Just had to lie down on the roof for a minute to rest. That was when I heard the sound of a horse coming.

I made my way cautiously across the roof and over to the next one, the Mercantile. It was very still and pretty dark, and the sounds were clear. I crawled on my belly so's to make less noise, and as I came toward the front, I could see a dark mass ahead of me. A man with a rifle.

The rider had slowed down, now but he was still coming; he'd be in range in a minute. I reached for my gun and managed to get it out; it felt even heavier and less reliable in my left hand.

But in the dark, who could tell? I took a deep breath, started to ease back the hammer. Gilroy had a rifle; he was at a disadvantage. I could bluff him if he knew I had a gun on him.

I cocked my firty-five as loudly

as I could, taking a deep breath, and called out, "Elevate, Gilroy, and see another sunrise." It sounded scary enough for anyone.

GILROY was surprised, but he wasn't scared. He rolled around fast, and I knew that I hadn't gotten close enough. He dropped the rifle and got to his feet. But he wasn't putting his hands up; he was going for his gun.

And I realized then that Gilroy was young and his eyes were sharp—and this wasn't a very dark night. I could just about make him out. but he could see me perfect. He had his shortgun out while I was still trying to bring mine up.

"Drop that Colt, you old fool," he said.

The sounds of a horse walking were close now. I knew he wouldn't shoot—no, by grab, he'd jump me; he'd buffalo me with the barrel of his gun.

So I let my hand drop.

Sometimes a gent can think so fast it's unbelievable if you're told about it. But it came to me just as Gilroy said that; I knew what to do and knew I could do it. I let my hand drop, until the gun was pointing down toward the street—and fired.

Gilroy started to curse me and jump me at the same moment, but the motion wasn't completed. He was actually a half foot away when he stiffened, and I heard the sound of a gunshot from below. Standing up, Gilroy was the perfect target. He kicked out with one foot and caught me in the chest and I went sprawling backward. That time the stars fell right down on top of me.

IT SEEMED like I was covered in bandages from head to foot when I woke up, but I felt better when the sawbones came in and said there was a visitor to see me. Kansas came in, looking the same as he had the day he arrived. He didn't say anything at first; he just gripped my left hand and squeezed till I thought it'd break. But I didn't mind.

"I'm saying goodbye, old-timer."

"Why...ain't you going to be Town Marshal?"

[*Turn To Page 75*]

A Powerful Novel of the Baseball Diamond

BASEBALL BLOOD

by T. W. Ford

The big August issue is now on sale

SPORTS FICTION

Cowboy Swindler From Abilene

True Fact Article

by Harold Gluck

THERE IS a certain type of the easterner as a villain and western fiction which portrays cheat and the westerner as the poor victim. The miner in his shack, all alone and friendless, unable to read or write, signs his X and thus loses his mine to the crook from the east. Or perhaps, a group of ranchers face ruin because an eastern syndicate refuses to sell them water rights. Which means that soon the poor cattle on the range will slowly thirst to death. Or the eastern banker threatens to fore-close the mortgage on the ranch because the beautiful girl has refused to be his wife. But how about the westerner being the crook and the easterner being the victim? Perish the thought! Let's go one better, make them both crooks and see what happens. Now that's a novel idea and should work out well in fiction. But in the meantime, here is a true story of what actually once happened when West met East under peculiar circumstances.

On one night in August, 1883, the brilliant electric light which hung outside the entrance to the *Madison*

Square Theatre, shone down on the faces of a well dressed, hurrying crowd of men and women who were anxious to reach their seats inside the building before the curtain should rise. Standing just inside the main entrance, with rather a dubious look on his face, was a stout, healthy looking man, with rough clothes and bronzed face, whom a veteran New Yorker would at once pronounce as a countryman. Now and then this stranger to the city walked over to the box office and in hearty tones cried out, "Any seats yet?" The play which was on then was a popular one, and on this particular evening all the seats had been taken. The stranger had waited until coming to the play house before securing a ticket, and as a consequence, was unable to get one. Now he was waiting in hope that a ticket would be returned at the last minute.

The ticket seller looked up with a smile at the stout man's question, which was then asked for nearly the dozenth time, and responded blandly, "No, there are none in yet."

Just then from one side of the lobby where he had been examining the pictures of actresses in a glass case, a young man, dressed in a stylish suit, walked over to where the stranger stood, and in polite and modest tones asked, "Pardon me, but were you trying to get a seat?" "Wall, I should say I war," the stranger replied. "Then won't you take one of mine? I bought two expecting to meet a friend here, but he hasn't turned up and I don't believe he will come."

The man with the bronzed face was overcome with gratitude and gladly consented to sit beside the handsomely dressed young man. They went into the theatre, took their seats and enjoyed the play. The young man was exceedingly agreeable, and his elder companion talked with him frankly and without restraint. He told him that he was a ranchman from Abilene, Kansas, and that he was in New York for the second time in his entire life. This led to conversation about the sights of the great city. Inasmuch as his polite young friend professed to be thoroughly familiar with the ins and outs it was only natural that the Westerner should comply with the young man's suggestion that they should go together and visit some of the notorious places.

"I'm staying at the *Fifth Avenue* Hotel," said the ranchman, as they parted for the night. "Come round an' take dinner with me tomorrow night." The young man accepted the invitation.

On the next night, after the two men had more than satisfied their stomach's demands, and had inbibed liberally of claret and champagne, they walked out of the dining room and into the corridor. They stopped at the desk, while the Westerner took a well padded pocket book out of his trousers, and counting out five hundred dollars in bills of large denomination, deposited them with the clerk. The young man appeared to take no interest in this proceeding, yet all the time his eyes were on the well filled wallet and the green bank notes. The ranchman and his young companion left the hotel. Late that night the older man returned.

AFTER BREAKFAST the next morning, Benjamin Ashley, for such was the name of the man from the West, was lounging in the corridors when he was addressed by the clerk. The employee, who, after apologizing for his boldness, asked the hotel guest if he was aware of the character of the young man who was with him on the previous night. Mr. Ashley replied that he had met him since he had come to New York and was very much pleased with him.

"Let me give you a pointer," said the clerk, "that young man is 'Hungry Joe', the biggest swindler in this town."

Benjamin Ashley was startled. He said nothing for a moment. Then he became thoughtful and finally replied, "That's the kind o' huckleberry he is, is it? Wall, all right. Let him blaze away. He can't beat me playin' poker." The clerk smiled sarcastical-

ly, but considering that he had done his duty, dropped the subject at once and without further remark handed over from the safe the $1000 which Mr. Ashley asked for.

After this, 'Hungry Joe' and his innocent friend were often together. They drove through the Park and up the Boulevard. They went to the theatre and they played poker. Mr. Ashley grew more confidential and told his companion that he owned a valuable ranch in Kansas, and that he was about to sail for England to have his eyes treated. More poker games were played and more bank bills were drawn from those on deposit in the hotel safe. A week after the clerk had warned him of 'Hungry Joe', Mr. Ashley had lost nearly $4000. Yet he was unwilling to give up.

One afternoon he was in his room with 'Hungry Joe', and two friends, which the latter had introduced. They had played poker and the Westerner had met with his usual poor luck. He grew despondent.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, boys," he said at length. "I didn't think you could beat me at poker. But by golly, you've done it, an' done it bad too. Now I've got to get to Europe somehow or tother, an' I don't see how I'm to do it on which I've got left of my pile. So, as I said, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you a mortgage on my ranch for $4,000."

The men expressed their sympathy for Mr. Ashley and offered to think about it. They soon left the hotel and went into a saloon. Here they concocted a scheme. They would telegraph Abilene, to the postmaster, to find out if Ashley's representations were correct. If they were, they would buy the ranch outright at a reduced figure. The telegram read something like this:

"Postmaster, Abilene, Kansas:
Telegraph full particulars about
Benjamin Ashley at my expense.
R. Dickson."

The answer came and was entirely satisfactory. 'Hungry Joe' and his companions managed to scrape together $14,000, and with this sum in their pockets they went to the hotel and offered it to Ashley. The offer was promptly accepted, the papers were drawn up, and the money went into the *Fifth Avenue Hotel* safe until Ashley wished to draw it out.

Two days later a Guion line steamship left its dock amid the waving of handkerchiefs. Among the little knot of persons who stood on the edge of the pier to get the last glimpse of their friend Ashley, were the three easterners. The bronze face ranchman waved his slouch hat at the trio as the huge black hull of the steamer swung loose from its moorings. The trio politely tipped their stylish derbies in acknowledgement of the farewell greeting. A few minutes and the vessel was out of sight. The trio turned, chuckled to themselves, and hurried away with the remark, "Well, he's safely out of the way! A neat little pile we'll make out of that ranch too, eh?" At this point the story should end, and you might drop a tear or two for the poor westerner who was trimmed by the eastern slickers. But it has sequel, being a true life story.

Two weeks from the time this steamer sailed there was registered again at the same hotel, "Benjamin Ashley, Abilene, Kansas." 'Hungry Joe' heard of the arrival and hastened to the hotel to pay his respects. he sent up his card and was soon ushered into the presence of a total stranger.

"You are not Mr. Ashley?" he inquired. "There must be some mistake. I was looking for Mr. Benjamin Ashley, of Abilene, Kansas." "I am that man, sir." responded the stranger. "Why that is strange. Is it possible there are two men of the same name in your town? It was only a few days ago that I bought a ranch of a Mr. Benjamin Ashley of Abilene."

"You did, eh? Well, then I guess you were swindled, my friend." answered the traveller, dryly. "There is but one Benjamin Ashley in Abilene and that is myself and I haven't any recollection of selling my ranch

to you or to anyone else. I just got in yesterday from Europe."

'Hungry Joe' turned pale. The vision flashed across him that he, the arch-swindler of New York had been himself swindled. The thought was humiliating. For a moment he said nothing.

"By the way," continued this new Mr. Ashley," what kind of a looking man was this double of mine?" 'Hungry Joe' described him. A flash of recognition crossed the stranger's face. He laughed as he said, "I see it all now. That man must have been Harry Barnes, one of my cowboys!" The mystery was easily solved now. The genuine Benjamin Ashley had gone abroad some time before for the purpose of having his eyes treated. The cowboy followed, determined to have a good time by using his employer's name, and perhaps money. After becoming acquainted with 'Hungry Joe' he lost nearly all he had, and to his chagrin, a "city chap" had beaten him at poker. He would get even with him in some way. And so he devised the scheme of selling his employer's property.

'Hungry Joe' went thoughtfully from the hotel. One who was close enough to him might have heard the murmur, "Beaten by a cowboy! What a d-n fool I am!"

THE END

KANSAS TORNADO

(Continued From Page 71)

He shook his head. "Even if *he* goes," and Kansas' eyes got that look in them again so I knew he meant Shallicross, "I wouldn't stay." He seemed to be looking through the walls of the building. "This whole town is full of her," he whispered; "I got to leave it behind with her."

And somehow all the pieces fell together when he said that.

"You...you're the one Virgie Shallicross..."

He nodded. "She came to me... and died. And she begged me not to hurt her father...to help him. She knew that Gilroy and the others were planning to throw him out, take over the town; Gilroy bragged about it when he thought he was getting her. I promised, and I kept my word."

He stood up. "Now I've got to go...before I kill him."

And I knew then that Kansas would carry that hate in his eyes with him for the rest of his life. He wouldn't break his word, and the hate would eat him.

"Look, son," I said, "you don't have to kill a man to have revenge. Eli Shallicross is finished; hell, he's wiped out. Even if he has some money left, like I suspect he has, he's still lost everything that means anything to him. He loved power, loved dominating folks. You broke that; you made him see how no one cares about him. He'll have to go away, too."

Kansas shrugged. "Yeah, he's finished. He was finished when he heard Virgie was dead; I guess he figured she'd come back. But she's gone..."

I knew it was no use telling him he was young, that maybe he'd meet someone else. There's some who don't.

"I'm saying so long, old-timer. When you get out of here, you'll find I haven't forgotten what you did for me."

"I sorta wish you'd tell me your name," I said. "I can keep a promise, too, and I promise not to tell anyone else."

He shook his head. "Like I told you—Kansas. That's why I couldn't marry her; that's why I couldn't court her in the open. Kansas. That's all the name I ever had."

I saw him go by the window, riding as if the devil himself were after him. Kansas tornado. Yeah, that's the way it would be; he'd live with that hate, and men like Shallicross, and their workings would fall like wheat before him...like ripe, golden wheat.

—THE END—

Sometimes a man needs a friend more than he needs hay!

THE STAFF OF LIFE

by Charles Ackeley

(author of "Star in the Dust")

AS HE HEADED through the cold street toward Marty's Saloon, Ladd Kane knew only too well that he was facing bankruptcy—for the lack of fifteen or twenty tons of hay. He had the money to buy hay, but there was no hay for sale, except for a ton which the feed dealer here in Roundtree had promised him out of the car that was now being spotted down by the feed and sales barns. That wouldn't make a dent in his problem. His outlook was as bleak as the weather.

The cold had driven quite a crowd into Marty's, and Ladd joined old Jake Trumbull at the bar. He ordered drinks for himself and Jake, while he turned his earflaps back up into his cap.

"Know where I can get twenty tons of hay?" he asked.

Old Jake grinned at him. "Sure. I know where there's a hundred or two hundred tons that you can have for the hauling."

"Where?" Ladd asked hopefully.

"Out at old MacDonalds. He'd be glad to give you all you want."

"Yeah! And his right eye along with it." Ladd answered, his hopes falling.

Jake continued on with his rawhiding. "There's his son over there. You might ask him."

Ladd turned and looked distaste-

fully at Prince MacDonald. The only son of the old Scotchman was getting up from a poker game with the two Welsh brothers, who lived up in the hills. They were breaking up their game with an argument that was loud enough to attract his interest.

Ladd was standing a dozen paces from the poker table when young MacDonald got unsteadily to his feet, after raking in a pot containing a pile of silver and bills that would half fill a hat. MacDonald was evidently drunk, his young arrogant face flushed and his eyes unsteady.

Hoge Welsh said sourly, "All right, Duke, take yore winnings an' git back to yore castle."

Young MacDonald s t o o d and clutched the edge of the table, his body weaving slightly, and the pearl-handled, nickle plated gun in its scabbard swinging like the clapper on a cowbell. Then he shoved the pile of money back across the table.

"Nope, I don't need yore money that bad," he said. "I saw you steal one of my discards a while ago to make a hand to beat me with. So I gave you some of your own medicine. I stole the ten-spot to fill that straight, just to show you I could do it. But I changed my mind. I won't take your money."

The black-browed Hoge Welsh doubled his fists and glared at the son of old Angus MacDonald.

"You stole a card to fill a hand against me?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes. I was gonna keep the money, to make up for what you probably cheated me out of. But I ain't a thief."

He started to pick up his legitimate winnings and stuff them into his pockets.

Hoge Welsh reached out a hand and raked the money from the last pot over toward his brother Slim, then put his hand on the money that young MacDonald was pocketing.

"No," MacDonald answered doggedly. "I'm keepin' what I won fair."

"You just think you are," Welsh answered, sliding his chair back with an angry sound. "You're forkin' it over, or—"

"Or what?" MacDonald asked, awareness of trouble now penetrating his drunken brain.

"Or—this!" Welsh had his gun out. It wasn't particularly fast, but it was a great deal faster than the fumbling draw that young MacDonald tried to make from his fancy holster.

Nonetheless, MacDonald did try to draw, and that seemed to be what Welsh had hoped for. The lines tightened on his face as his trigger finger tightened—

Ladd Kane, standing with his back to the bar, took a sudden hand. He drew and shot just as Welsh triggered. Welsh's bullet hit MacDonald, but not squarely, for Kane's shot hit Hoge's arm just as he fired. Hoge's gun went spinning.

MacDonald slumped to the floor, Welsh's bullet in his ribs. Kane spoke sharply to Hoge's brother, who was clawing for his weapon.

"Don't do it, Slim!"

The younger Welsh saw Kane's weapon on him, scowled and dropped his gun back into his holster. Kane stepped over and lifted it out and slid it down the bar, then picked up Hoge's gun and sent it down to join it.

"Get the doctor, Marty," he called to the saloonman who was coming around from back of the bar, untying his white apron. "The boy is hurt."

Hoge Welsh nursed his wounded arm, dropped into a chair and glowered at Kane.

"You heard him brag he cheated us," he protested. "When did you start sidin' crooks?"

Kane answered evenly, "he admitted stealing a card, but he didn't take your money. He was honest enough to tell you what he'd done—and why. I don't like to see anybody shoot a drunk that can't help himself. Right or wrong, it's no good, Welsh."

Hoge Welsh gave Ladd a long insolent look that was a threat, itself. "Maybe your meddlin' will pay off—and then again, maybe it won't. I don't take friendly to people tryin' to run my business."

He turned to his brother. "Let's go, Slim. This place stinks of righteousness."

WHEN THE doctor and the Town Marshal came in, Ladd Kane, told his story to the officer, and Trumbull and Marty backed him up. Marshal Hurlin looked at Kane queerly, then observed:

"I didn't know either of them MacDonalds had a friend that'd do that for him."

"I am not a particular friend," Ladd Kane snapped. "I don't think any more of a spoiled lad than I ever did. But I think still less of a buzzard that would shoot a drunk for a hand full of silver. Maybe I'm wrong, but that's the way it is."

The Marshal rubbed the point of his nose and studied Kane, then said vaguely, "Yeah, I see what you mean. But I've also seen a lot of trouble come from good intentions in my day. Too bad."

Ladd Kane buttoned up his sheepskin coat and along with Jake Trumbull headed out into the cold, his mind back on his own affairs.

And his troubles were serious for a young man without any financial backing for the small spread he had down on Willow Creek alongside the great MacDonald ranch. The previous summer had been so dry that the hay crop had been short, but he could have pulled through the winter if the blizzard hadn't struck. Hay, the staff of life for cattle, was almost non-existant.

A week ago, on the First of March, a cold windy rain had unseasonably hit the range. That night the wet ground froze. Then the storm laid down a layer of snow on top of the ice—and the cattle were whipped. They could not break through the snow and ice to reach the scant grass, and there wasn't any hay. Except at MacDonald's, and MacDonald had immediately put a sign on his front fence:

NO HAY FOR SALE.

As they headed through the cold wind toward the feed barn, Old Jeff said:

"Son, you done made yourself a bad pair of enemies, but you won't get no thanks from Old MacDonald or that whelp of his, either."

"Maybe so," Kane admitted. "I reckon I should have minded my own business, but it kinda hit me sudden that young MacDonald had guts, drunk or sober. It took a pretty deep-seated honesty to do what he did, and I couldn't stand by and see him get killed for it."

"I know what you mean," Jeff admitted. "It kinda surprised me, too. But you're a mite too willin' to help somebody else without countin' what it might cost you. You're like yore Old Man was about that—an' it kept him a pore man all his life."

"But he lived happy and died with a lot of friends," Kane answered.

He went on down to the feed barn where the hay car was open. He hitched his team to the hay wagon, and pulled up into line behind the other ranchers who were unloading the box car.

He helped the man ahead of him load his alotted hay onto his wagon, then pulled his own hay frame up to the boxcar and set about loading his thirty bales. It would not go far in feeding his hungry stock. He was wrestling with the hay, and with the problem of getting more, when Doctor Bentley, muffled in a sheepskin coat, came down to see him.

"Would you mind taking Prince MacDonald home?" the doctor asked. "He's not in shape to ride, and he'd be better off at home than in town." The doctor paused a moment, then added, "And safer. Those Welshes are likkering up and making some talk down at Farley's bar."

Ladd Kane's first impulse was to refuse to go out of his way to take the youth home. But it struck him that the doctor didn't like Prince MacDonald, either, and yet he was taking care of him because there was no one else to do it.

"All right," Kane agreed. "It won't be far out of my way."

He drove his hay wagon around to the doctor's house. A ton of hay does

not make a large load on a big hay frame, and he restacked the bales so as to hollow out a place for the wounded man to lie, protected from the bitter wind by bales stacked around him.

Kane and the doctor got him loaded onto the wagon and covered with quilts furnished by the doctor's wife.

"Why can't you handle me more careful?" Young MacDonald whined. "I ain't a sack of feed, to be throwed around."

"Just take it easy," Doctor Bentley said. "We can't help it if it hurts you a little."

MacDonald said, when the wagon started, "Can't you take it easier over those bumps?"

Ladd Kane formed a sharp answer, then caught himself and said:

"I'll go as easy as I can. The snow on the road will make it a little smoother."

"And it will freeze me to death," MacDonald complained. "I ain't got enough quilts. Could you take your coat off and spread it over me?"

"I'd freeze, too, and wouldn't be able to drive you home," Kane explained, trying to hide his contempt. "But I'll open up another bale of hay and spread over you. That'll help."

Kane stopped the team and unwired one of his bales of precious hay, breaking the beads into a thick layer over the wounded youth.

"That'll have to do you," he said, starting the wagon again. MacDonald remained sullenly silent.

THE AIR WAS dry and razor sharp, and the road out was a white expanse cut only by the twin dirt-blackened ruts. The clouds were lowering and an ugly gray. There was a promise of still worse weather. He was thankful that there was still enough hay left in his pile to keep the cattle fed another day or two. Even so, only a miracle might save them.

He finally brought the wagon up in front of the MacDonald ranchhouse and opened the gate and drove the wagon up to the front door, still controling his temper against the grumblings of the wounded youth,

The MacDonald house was a long and low frame structure painted white, well cared for, and with smoke pouring out of a big rock chimney at one end of the building. It was a substantial place, with large tight feed barns painted ochre red, their metal roofs clad in snow blankets. Back of them were the corrals, and off to the left a tightly fenced hay yard with two massive snow covered stacks. Ladd looked enviously at those hundreds of tons of hay, and his thoughts were bitter.

Old MacDonald came to the door himself. He was a lean man whose shoulders were beginning to cave forward as he developed a stoop. He wore corduroy pants tucked into riding boots, a sheeplined coat and a raccoon cap. His face was red and pinched and his lips made a tight line against his wrinkled jaws.

"Didn't you see the sign on the gate?" he demanded as Kane wrapped his reins around his brake handle and jumped off the frame. "I've no hay for sale."

"Who asked you for hay?" Kane snapped. "I've come to deliver a package. If you want it, come and help me get it out my wagon, so I can be getting on."

"For me you delivered a package?" the old man asked suspiciously. "Who sent it?"

"The doctor. Your son thought his hide was tough enough to stop a bullet. He guessed wrong. Where do you want him?"

The wounded youth groaned and pushed his head and shoulders up through the loose hay under which he had been lying. The old man took one look at the boy's bleary eyes, and called over his shoulder sharply to a Mexican cook. They got a chair and despite the youth's grumbling, they got him into it and the three men managed to get the patient into a bedroom and into bed.

Old MacDonald's mouth was tight, and he hardly spoke until they left the boy's room and came back into the long, snug living room. The rancher stood with his back to the

fire and looked searchingly at Kane as he questioned him.

"How did it happen?"

Kane told him the bare facts. MacDonald seemed hardly to believe him, and repeatedly questioned him about the details. He shook his head, as though he could not make himself comprehend.

"No MacDonald ever cheated any man out of a nickle."

Ladd thought, *nor ever turned loose one once he got his hands on it.* But he said:

"I didn't say Prince cheated the Welsh boys. I'd put it this way; he was tempted to cheat them, and started to do it. But he couldn't go through with it, and he had the guts to tell them what he'd done, and refuse to take the money he'd won."

He saw a change come over MacDonald's face. The old man was struggling under some strong emotion he was trying to hold back.

"I'm glad he did that, even though they shot him. And that was when you say you went to his aid. I didn't know that you and he were friends." There was a shrewd look on the old man's face.

"We're not. I just didn't like the deal the Welsh boys were giving him."

"They're a bad lot, and I'll have trouble with them for this. How much do I owe you for that, and for bringing him home?"

Here was a chance, Kane knew, to demand the hay he so desperately needed. But the ghost of his father settled that question quickly.

"I don't charge neighbors for helping them," he said. "I'll be going, if that's all I can do for you."

He shoved his hat onto his head angrily and started for the door.

"Wait," the old man's jaw muscles were tensed. "Do you mean that?"

"I said it didn't I?"

"I'm sorry," Old MacDonald said. "But you see, I've lived in this section since I came to this country near forty years ago, and this is the first time in my life here that any of my neighbors has ever done one thing for me without demanding full pay for it."

The old man seemed to be talking more to himself than to Kane, but the idea that he expressed came as a shock to Kane, because he knew in a general way that it was true. All his life he had been hearing tales of the efforts of his neighbors to get ahead of the Scotchman. It was a kind of everlasting game with them. Now it hit him with a sudden forcefulness that such a thing as this could hurt a man deeply.

"I don't believe everybody's that way," Kane said lamely. "Maybe you and them don't understand each other."

"I suppose we don't," MacDonald admitted. "I know what they say about me. I've made mistakes, but they were natural under the circumstances."

LADD SAW the lined face more clearly now, and it seemed to him that the tightness there could easily have come from something besides hardness, it could have come from bitterness as well.

MacDonald seemed eager to talk, as though he were hungry for an understanding listener.

"When I was a lad in the old country," he said, "I lived in the worst kind of poverty. We were cold every winter and always hungry. I married and brought my wife to this country, and came out West where life offered us something.

"I knew nothing about cows or ranching. I worked in livery stables. I did anything that would make a dollar to feed my wife and my new baby. It was hard, and the fear of hunger and cold was always gnawing at me. My wife died because I did not have the money to have her cared for rightly, and the baby was the only thing left me.

"I bought a broken-hipped horse and learned to ride him, and I homesteaded, and gradually got a few cattle. I raised my boy myself, and I was always afraid that he would suffer the hunger and cold that I did. That was why I worked so hard, and why I tried to hold onto the money I made. Call it fear, if you like. I'd had enough of hunger to

make me fear it.

"I saw men make money and throw it away, and I couldn't understand that. I suppose they couldn't understand my fear of poverty, and they called me greedy. Maybe that was what it amounted to, but I couldn't help it.

"I spoiled my boy, and he is a selfish, unreasoning lad. I made him like that, trying to be good to him."

Old MacDonald went on, "I resented the way the people here made a game out of trying to get the best of me, and I would have none of them. I was wrong there, too. I suppose."

As the old man talked on, Ladd Kane stood with his back to the warm fire and realized that the old Scotchman had lived in fear all his years, and had suffered hardship, indignity and even tragedy at every turn of the road. With all the land and the registered cattle he had acquired, with all the money he had in the bank, his life had been lonely and tragic failure because of this haunting fear.

Now the man was pathetically eager to talk, as though clutching at this one opportunity to explain himself to a neighbor. He began talking cattle, and this led him from his very beginnings on a bare homesteaded section of grazing land up to his present ten thousand acres and his registered stock.

"I'm not young any more," he went on, "and the lad does not take an interest in good stock. That's why I've sold off everything except the small herd of registered sires and dams. And right now, those cows are up in Box Elder Canyon, getting ready to starve to death."

"I should think you'd want to get them down out of there in this weather," Kane observed. "You've got feed for them."

"Yes," Old MacDonald said sadly. "I wanted them down. But my boy didn't want to go up there in this weather and help drive them down. So I sent him to town to hire somebody to help. I'm not young enough to do the job by myself. Instead of doing the errand I sent him on, he got drunk and started gambling..." The old man's voice trailed off, and in his disappointment he was silent a long moment.

Then he looked at Ladd Kane speculatively. "It's a shame that such good stock should starve to death," he observed. "You wouldn't know anybody who'd take the job of helping me go up here and get them down, would you?" He was fearful of putting the question in a direct manner that would admit of rebuff.

Again the picture of all MacDonald's hay came to Kane's mind, and again he thrust aside the temptation to drive a hard bargain with the man.

Kane looked at the old man, and he saw clearly now that the lines of his face were etched in suffering, in unceasing toil against almost insuperable odds in a strange and inhospitable country.

And suddenly, Ladd Kane felt a great pity for the old man who could have bought him out a dozen times over.

"Well," he said. "My stock's got enough feed to last 'em another night. I reckon I could help you."

"That would be kind of you," Old MacDonald said. "I'll have your team taken care of, and we'll start right away."

AS THEY rode uphill toward the the canyon on a pair of MacDonald horses, Ladd Kane had the feeling that he might again be playing the sucker. He had come to the MacDonald ranch disliking the old cowman. The rancher had worked on his sympathies to the point where he had talked him into helping with a job that he couldn't get his own son or anybody else to do. Kane saw the cleverness of the man, and he was angry and disgusted with himself.

Cold gnawed at him as they worked their way through the deep drifts and over the rocky floor of draws, climbing gradually upward through the forest of snow-laden scrub oaks and pines. Old MacDonald was silent now, and brooding.

They came suddenly out of the snow-laden pines into a box canyon, and MacDonald pulled his horse up

sharply and muttered something. Kane looked into the small canyon and understood.

The fifty blooded Herefords were already rounded up, and three men were pushing them out toward the trail. Kane recognized the two Welsh brothers and their gaunt old father. The three lean mountain men had their heads down in the face of the wind, and were heading the cattle directly toward MacDonald and Ladd Kane. Apparently they had not yet seen the newcomers.

Kane and the old man moved forward alertly, and presently the Welsh men saw them and pulled their horses up. MacDonald rode forward slowly, and Kane sided him.

"Where are you taking my cattle?" MacDonald asked Hoge Welsh.

Hoge Welsh slapped his chaps with the end of his bridle reins, while his father and Slim moved their horses some distance to either side of him, and waited.

"I was just going to hold them till I collect a debt from your son."

"What kind of a debt?" MacDonald answered.

"Your son won four hundred dollars from us this morning, cheating in a poker game. We'll settle for five hundred, or take the cattle."

MacDonald said. "My boy did not cheat you. I've already heard about the game. Now you can ride off my property."

"We'll ride off your property when you pay us, and the amount will keep going up, the longer you wait to settle it."

"You'll not blackmail a dollar o' mine," MacDonald snapped. "Now ride!"

Hoge Welsh said. "How'd you like to have your son branded a common card thief—"

MacDonald's face went white, and he reached for his gun. Ladd Kane saw the move, and knew that the old man was going against hopeless odds. His own gun came out, and he threw down, not on Hoge Welsh, but on Slim Welsh, who, unnoticed, had got his weapon free of its holster.

Slim Welsh with his pistol butt balanced in his fist inconspicuously on his saddle horn had started to trigger the weapon. Ladd Kane's bullet drilled his chest and knocked him clear out of the saddle, where he kicked up a small flurry of snow, and died under his horse's hooves.

Kane whipped his gun around on the elder Welsh. The oldster, his face black with rage, had got his rifle out of his saddle boot and had it to his shoulder when Ladd Kane fired. Welsh's rifle fell in the snow and Welsh, reeling, caught hold of his saddle horn with both fists as his horse bolted. He left a trail of blood on the snow.

Hoge Welsh, frozen still a moment in surprise, cursed and turned and spurred his horse off toward his father.

MacDonald, still stunned by the turn of events, said dazedly; "He didn't even shoot. I was watching him all the time instead of the others."

"Yes," Kane answered. "They planned it that way. I expect. I knew Hoge wouldn't shoot because I punctured his gun arm this morning. His job was to keep your attention while the others shot us. I don't think he'll come back alone to trouble you. Are you ready to start this stock moving down?"

Old MacDonald's shoulders sagged, then straightened. "Wait a minute," he said. Then, as if to himself; "Yes, it's enough. I've had enough. They'd have killed me, but for you."

He turned to Ladd Kane: "Son," he said, "I want to say something. "Many's the time I've seen you workin' yourself to death when my own boy was asleep or loafing somewhere, and I've wished you were mine, or mine was more like you. I know what that one ton of hay meant in your wagon, but you wouldn't take advantage o' my troubles to demand hay of me, though you've busied yourself the whole day with me and my boy.

"I've known a long while that I was through here, but I had no way of getting out, nobody to turn the place over to. It was not for nothing that I've talked so much with you this day, and what I've learned satis-

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Digger John's Flume

by A. A. Baker

(author of "Digger John's Horse Race")

Digger John put his foot in his mouth again... and this time, he had a bear by the tail, besides!

DIGGER JOHN

THE THIN sunlight, that heralded an early Sierra winter, revealed a milling crowd of miners and hanger-ons thrashing violently about on Gold Run's muddy main street. Men flowed back and forward like waves as they tried to hold a good view of the fighters. The heavy blows brought respectful grunts from the audience and appreciative yells of encouragement.

Digger John, tramping the mud in the forefront of the circle, hunched his big, red-shirted shoulders with each blow. He made imaginary feints in the chill air and shuffled his booted feet deftly.

The two fighters blew foggy air from heaving lungs and steam rose from their sweaty shoulders. They were evenly matched and rocked each other with solid blows struck from work-reddened fists. The fight had tramped the damp street solid, but there was no give-up sign from the sluggers.

The man next to Digger spat his chew into the street and ducked one of the miner's swings with the caustic remark, "Who's fightin'? You or the Brothers boys?"

Digger pulled in his lean belly as one of the fighters smacked the other a mighty blow then answered, "The Brothers is doin' the fightin' partner; I'm jest keepin' warm." He paused and asked, "What for are they hammerin' hell out'a each other anyway?"

"One bought an option," was the growled reply, "with *our* stake and Two is tryin' to teach One a lesson."

Digger stopped shuffling, "Two?" Which is Two?" he demanded. "What'd you mean *our* stake...are you Three?"

"I'm Five." He took Digger by the arm. "Come on over to Dredger Dan's bar and I'll buy you a drink. One and Two'll take some time to settle this and we might as well be comfortable." He rubbed his ribs and glared at Digger's elbow. "It'll be lots safer too!" Five led the big miner out of the milling crowd into the warm barroom.

Digger waited until the tin cups were filled with redeye and then demanded, "All right, Five, tell me about One an' Two whils't I'm sober enough to understand."

"It goes back a long way, far as Missouri." The speaker took a reflective sip of his drink. "Pa never was one for poetry but Ma was. It kind'a made Pa mad, so he give us numbers instead of names. They's five of us Brothers, so Pa named us One, Two, Three, Four and Five. I'm the youngest. One, jest cause he's the oldest, is always trying to take charge of things. Coming out to California to hunt gold was his idea: well, we come, and been five years trying to make a stake so's we can get home.

"We been in every canyon, and river bottom, in California. We been in the Southern Mines, in Weaverville, and every other gold-field including the Feather River Gold Lake stampede. Then, we come into the North Fork of the American and, after starving all summer, hit a good stake. Enough to go home on." He paused in the manner of a homesick man, his eyes filmed over the look of disappointment as he bruskly con-

tinued, "Then, One took the whole danged stake and bought a ninety day option on a gravel bed below Oathes' Flat! Spent the whole stake!"

"Might be a lot of gold in that quartz bed." Digger commented solemnly.

"Might be a diamond mine there, too!" snapped Five Brothers. "But, we got us a ninety day option. In less'n thirty days the freeze'll set in, the snows'll come in and we'll be froze out; the Boston Stock Company'll have our money, they'll have their gravel bed back, and the Brothers'll spend the winter starving and freezing without enough gold to fill our teeth, let alone take us home to Missouri!"

DIGGER brushed a hairy forearm across his whiskered jaw and stared intently at the whiskey that sloshed in circles around the bottom of the cup. He'd heard a thousand similar stories. Mining in itself wasn't too difficult; a man got a sack of grub, a few tools, and sweated his insides out in the river bottoms. Sometimes he went years, making just enough to keep alive and then, the big day dawned; the gold was there, in every rock and cranny, until the gold pan sagged under the golden weight. The shouts of elation, and the dream of home, blasted through the rough crust. Built up layer by layer of disappointment over dry holes, the miner's dreams rainbowed through.

Then the weasels got busy. The stock dealers, the dry hole swindler, The Boston Company; all blue sky salesmen who smelled out the lucky man and took his hard-earned gold, like quicksilver on a hot stove.

"Options!" growled Digger. "Don't people know about options? Don't they ever stop an' think...?" He was interrupted by the noisy entrance of the fight spectators. They herded a big, bloody, man to the bar. He was wiping his battered mouth and when his puffy eyes caught sight of Digger's companion, he shouted, "Go git your brother! He's laying out in the water trough. Git him out'a there 'fore he gets sick with the fever. Go on, git!"

"I'll get him," Five growled, "then I'm gonna see if'n I can beat some sense into your big head!" The crowd silenced as Five stalked from the bar.

The gulp of raw whiskey spilled over the fighter's cut lip and he winced and glared at Digger. "I suppose Five's been telling you all about it? How I blew the stake on a ninety day option and all? Thinks I ain't got enough sense to pound sand in a rat hole. Trouble with them brothers of mine, they're afraid to chance it." He spat disgustedly, "Who wants to crawl home with a lousy five hundred ounces! Tain't a thimble full, compared with what that option flat'll be worth. All we got to get out, 'fore the freeze sets in, is another five hundred ounces to pay off the stock company and enough to git through the winter; we'll go home rich next summer! Rich, instead'a crawling home with some colors to show the homefolks."

His voice shook, and Digger's face showed sympathy. He knew of other men that quit too soon. Men who sold out seemingly dry holes only to have the buyer kick the dirt down another six inches and uncover a pocket worth thousands. Maybe One Brothers was right. The gold should be out on that flat and, if water could be brought in to run a stamp mill, maybe they could get enough high grade out before winter really set in, to pay off the option. Then, they could sweat out the winter and clean up in the Spring.

Digger banged his tin cup on the bar for attention. "They was a fella..." He collected the eyes of One and Five Brothers, who were helping Two gulp a drink at the end of the bar and they stared back at the big forty niner, "They was a fella..."

"We heard you, you pie-eatin', gabby, son-of-a-gaboon!" rudely interrupted Dredger Dan. "We know they was a fella...probably as no-good as you!"

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FAMOUS WESTERN

DIGGER frowned, slipped out a double-edged bowie knife, and jammed it deep into the oak bar. He listened to the twang of the steel, then lowered hard blue eyes to Dredger's level. "If'n you'll shut yore big trap, until I finish what I'm sayin', I'll put thet knife away. If'n yew open yore ugly trap 'fore I'm finished, I'll drag yew down the bar until yew look like yew rode the carriage through a sawmill!" Digger waited, until the deep breathing of a drunk in the back could be heard, then continued.

"They was a fella..." he paused but Dredger was speechlessly staring at the still quivering knife; "an' this fella was bein' chased by a Grizzly. They was over by Marysville where's they's lots of flat country with oak trees stickin' up all around. So, this fella named Johnny Eagen, he's hightailin' it across this flat, fast as his fat legs can go an' he's losin' ground. Yew never know what you can do 'til yew..."

"Digger John!" A desperately cold voice interrupted again and Digger turned wrathfully toward the speaker. Dredger Dan held a double shotgun, with short barrels, and he had both hammers back. He spoke slowly, but there was a mounting note of hysteria in his voice. "Git to the point or I'm gonna squeeze this trigger!

"All right. All right, Dredger!"

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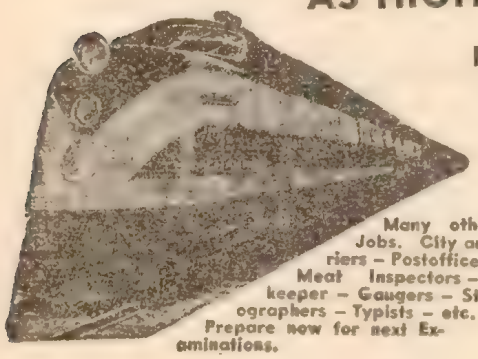

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the story-teller grunted. "If'n yew gotta hurry things, until the whole story's spoil't! Jest like some Johnny-come-lately grubs over placer ground then rushes away an' leaves the pickin's to the china boys..." He caught Dredger's look and added hurriedly, "This Johnny Eagen, he's really tryin', 'cause them Grizzly's don't climb trees very good an' Johnny'll save his hide from a maulin' if'n he can get up a tree!" Swiftly, Digger stepped around the bar and placed his red-shirted frame directly in front of the backbar mirror, then grinned cheerily at the man holding the gun. "Yew do any shootin' now an' yew'll have to send back east for another mirror! I'm tellin' this story an' if'n it's hurried, I can't get the point across."

Fury of possession and the urge to kill showed on Dredger's Dan's round-jowled face but he held his fire. "Was figgerin' yew wouldn't shoot!" taunted Digger. "Anyhow, Johnny Eagen was runnin' for this oak tree, with the Grizzly clos't behind." He waved a hairy hand at the Brothers'. "Like yew fellers is runnin' from winter—only winter's harder to beat than a bear. If'n yew boys could have another month of good weather, yew'd have time to get a stamp mill workin' an' take out enough gold to pay yore debt; but Winter's droppin' fast, an' if'n yew don't get the mill runnin', the Boston Company will foreclose an' get all the gold yew folks fought for!"

Digger looked around. "Anybody here know Johnny Eagen?" The men held a tight-lipped silence. "Johnny's dead." Digger said. "Yep, Johnny was killed by a bear in the summer of eighteen forty eight. He beat that Grizzly to the tree all right an' got up into that oak safe as yew please. Yep, got into the oak but poor Johnny got killed, 'cause they was another bear in the tree!"

There was a flat silence and Digger hurried on. "These Brothers is in the same position as pore Johnny Eagen. They's bein' chased by the bear of winter and The Boston Company is sittin' in the tree waitin' to

[*Turn Page*]

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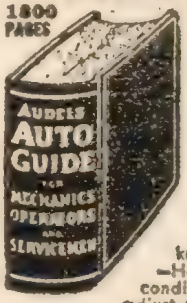

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claw 'em to death!"

One Brothers spoke harshly. "In jest ten days we could run through enough hard rock and rotten quartz to pay the whole bill to the stock company with enough over to carry our vittles through the winter! But them brothers' of mine..." His voice dropped in disgust. "Guess it's hopeless to try and build a stamp mill and flume; they want'a go home!" He glared down the bar at Two and Five.

THERE WAS a stir from the rear and an irate voice shouted, "My name's Hensley; I represent the Boston Company and I'm tired of this talk of swindle!" The speaker was a tall, thin, sailing ship, sort of man. His voice strained through his yankee nose and prominent yellow teeth clicked angrily over the words. "This man, this One Brothers, invested in an option on a property called the North Fork Canyon, a ninety day option, and it's one of the richest quartz ledges in this area! He's got ninety days to pay us the other five hundred ounces. Those were the terms and that's the way she's going to be!" His voice rose, "The Boston Stock Company plays for keeps and stands behind a bargain!" Angrily, the speaker strode beligerently through the bat wings and his heels could be heard receding down the board walk.

Digger came out from behind the bar and stared at the miners. These men had made the rush; they'd fought their dangerous way across a continent by foot and around the horn in stinking ships. Some had dared the fever ridden Isthmus of Panama. All had come to "see the 'Elephant'" with hopes of returning home with gold. They'd struggled in icy water and suffered in a thousand heat seared canyons. They felt a kinship to the Brothers.

Suddenly, Digger pounded a red fist on the bar and roared, "Get off'n yore backsides!" He pointed at the Brothers on the end of the bar. "Stead'a tryin' to beat One into a mess, try some *real* fightin' an' see if'n you can beat the Boston Stock

Company!" He turned to the crowd. "Let's shake that bear out'a the tree! We'll get that stamp mill runnin' 'fore winter hits heavy an' keep these boys from losin' their option!"

The men looked hopeful and Digger continued a barrage of fighting words. "Didn't all the men in the Southern Mines throw together an' build a flume? Why can't we gang up an' build a flume an' a stamp mill?"

"It'd take a five-mile drop to get enough water pressure to run any kind of a waterwheel mill," Two Brothers grunted. "They's only five of us and we ain't got time. Besides..."

"Besides! Besides!" shouted Digger. "That's what I'm sayin'; yew'll have to get off'n yore backsides an' we'll have to get workin'. We'll run us a five mile flume if'n we need it, or a fifty mile flume! We've got a month."

"And only five men in the company," came the prompt objection.

"Then we'll get us forty more! Give each a share. They's lots of miners right here in Gold Run that come out of the rivers broke. We'll round 'em up an' for a share they'll go back in with you."

"We got another month, boys!" shouted One. He edged his way through the group and ranged a husky frame alongside of Digger. "I'm for throwin' in with Digger John; I'll give him half my share right now. I come west to see the elephant an' I'm goin' to stay 'til I see that elephant come in with a bucket full of gold!"

The barroom hummed with excitement. A short time later the doors flared out and the newly forming company flowed out into the dirt street. The news spread like quicksilver and ragged gold seekers erupted from the shacks of lower town. Whiskered faces beamed as they scattered to roust friends and partners out of the saloons to get in on the luck. Soon, the stragglers joined the excited group around the dripping water trough and signed up for shares of the *Five Mile Flume Mining Company.*

[*Turn Page*]

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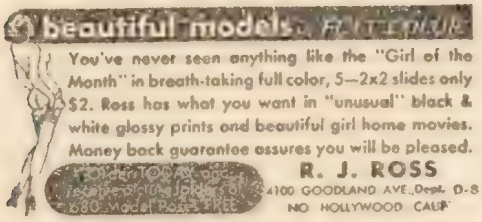
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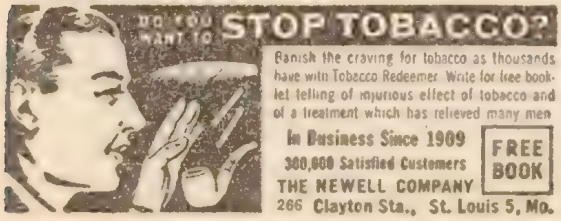
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DIGGER marched out of Lower Town toward the North Fork and he shuddered a bit when he noticed how the red mud of early winter clung to his boots. Talking about a five-mile flume was one thing, but building one in less than a month was like trying to chew a full plug of tobacco without spitting.

Late in the afternoon, Digger stood high on the canyon wall and watched the shadows of a dying sun lay chilly fingers across the granite bluffs. A man nudged his shoulder and remarked, "Them bluffs sit down in the river like a Missouri hog sittin' in a mud puddle. Drivin' a flume around them walls is goin' to be like gettin' a two year old to drive them same hogs out'a a cool mudhole on a hot day!"

Digger laughed. "We got men, not two-year-olds! Onc't four men an' a boy threw a cable across that river, just above Indian Leap. Seems to me, forty men can build a five mile flume if'n they's a pot of gold at the far end!"

That evening, they set up a camp of tents and brush lean-to's, for the extra men. The following morning, the ice was racked off the bean pots on the back of rusty stoves and the work was started. Drills were started boring on a level around the bluffs. Men clung in boatswain chairs and single-jacked deep into the hard rock. Numbed hands banged away with five-pound hammers, until the sweat ran through tattered shirts. An ex-sailor clung to the cliff like a monkey and laid a line high enough to give a drop to the water, once the flume would crawl high above the rumbling river.

High on the bluff, ten men were set to felling the tall sugar spruce. They stood on spring boards ten feet above the ground and bounced with each stroke of the five-pound, double-bitted axe. They swore and grunted but laid the tall trees on a line where other men lopped the branches and sawed twenty foot lengths, which were rolled over to pits. Deep in these pits, men grasped the oak handles of ten foot gang saws and pulled mightily. As the men on top braced their feet and

pulled, the two-inch boards fell away clean and were tied in neat, strong bundles, and shot down the bluff on greased runways.

Digger had the job of guiding the bundles down the mountain and his shouts could be heard above the roar of the river. His boots tangled in the buckbrush and the wild berry bushes tore at his clothes as he steered and cursed down the mountain. A few feet from the river, Digger John would snap loose his rope and the green boards would sink deep into the wild water, to be retrieved by soaking men and piled high on the bank. He'd pause, and watch the men swinging across the bluff, then climb wearily up the mile slope to start another load down.

While he gathered his breath after the climb, he'd keep an eye on the work. Far down the river he could see the men putting together the huge water wheel that would take the water from the flume on broad paddles, and turn the gears that would send the iron rollers to crush the quartz.

FOR DAYS the mountains echoed with the drilling, timber falling, hammering of wooden mauls, and the sliding screech of the timber slide. Each night the miners would gather around huge fires and fall asleep where they sat. The food got low and the cook prodded a couple of Digger's burros up the steep trail and into Gold Run. Late that night he prodded the burros back down the trail with sad news.

"The town's tied up as far as we're concerned. The Boston Company's got ever' storekeep scared to let us have a single pound of beans on the cuff! Ever' place I tried, they turned me down. 'Course," he added, "they got a right, 'cause we ain't got nothin' but promises to pay. Dredger Dan's the only one ain't scared; he sent us two barrels o' whiskey."

Digger scowled. "The meat animules is driftin' down to warmer levels. Deer an' such might keep us goin' but we ain't got time or men to go after them. We'll have to get

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some gold quick, else thet bear in the tree is goin' to get us!"

A many throated grumble rose from the tired men. "We'll string that stock company feller up! We'll march into town, get us a rope over the tallest tree on Main street, an' let the Yankee dangle!"

"T'ain't time for hangin' yet!" counseled Digger. He pulled his belt in another notch and continued, "We'll get us enough dust somewhere's to carry us through; now get back to workin' an' let me figure a piece."

The river slipped by, covering the grumbles of angry men, but Digger climbed high on the ridge and sat long into the night. Morning found the ice crusted along the edge of the swirling water. The sky was hidden by gray clouds that hung over the Sierras with a threat of snow.

Digger clambered onto a rock, spat a chew of tobacco into the stream, watched the oily scum swirl away, and addressed the assembly. "Take a hitch in yore belts; the goin's gettin' tough but yew know the gold's there, right?"

The mutters that greeted the question were followed by a shout from Pike Morris. "Sure, the gold's there! An' it'll stay there 'til next spring when that skinny Boston slob'll get it out. We're just makin' it easier for him. We'll get the heavy flume work done, an' the stamp mill'll be most completed, then the snow an' ice'll come an' it'll either be get out of the canyon or die here! We'll starve!"

"We'll not starve," answered the big miner on the rock. "We'll get some grub; leave that part to me. Now get back to work; yew can get through one day, or maybe two, without crawlin' back to town."

Pike Morris opened his mouth but Digger roared, "Yew keep workin' Pike, or else yew ain't the man I thought! Yew're not likely to be the first to quit 'cause yew're a gambling man an' if they's a single chance to come out ahead yew'll take it, right?"

Pike looked at his wet boots then picked up his drill and walked toward Digger. "I'm quittin'. Now!"

DIGGER JOHN'S FLUME

"No man's quittin'," Digger said softly, "unless he whips me first!"

"I'll do that too!" shouted Pike and raised the heavy drill and rushed. Digger leaped, and his boots caught Pike flush on the chest. The wet sand flew as they struggled. Pike got his hands free and raised the iron drill but Digger got his arms around Pike's chest and whirled him into the icy water. Pike went under and Digger held on tightly, until Pike relaxed, then hauled the unconscious man onto the bank. "Nobody's quittin'," he gasped, "until we win or the snow drives us out'a this canyon!"

Pike opened bloodshot eyes, nodded sullenly, then hunched over the fire.

"All right, boys," Digger ordered, "start puttin' up that flume."

"She'll not hold, if'n we do," the ex-sailor spoke reluctantly. "We haven't got half enough holes drilled to hold the cross beams. The flume might stand by herself, but she'll not hold long when we run the water in."

"That's a chance we'll take," barked Digger. "Them clouds on the summit ain't rainclouds. They mean snow an' mebbe lots of it. We'll start the water through the flume soon's she's up!" He sniffed, "Feel the freeze in the air? We're gonna have to take at least seven hundred ounces out'a that stamp mill to pick up that option an' feed us through the winter. The stamp mill's gotta be finished an' the water's gotta be runnin' down that flume in two, three days, or we're beat. I'll get some beans down here by tomorrow, yew get the machinery workin'!"

THE DAY passed and the clouds hung back. Morning brought Digger back up the river. He carried a heavy load of rich gravel and the men gathered around and watched him shovel aside the ice, stack the dirt against the flow of water, burn the bottom of the gold pan black with ashes from the fire, fill the pan with gravel from his flour sack, and gently rotate this.

[Turn Page]

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FAMOUS WESTERN

There was dead silence as his rough, red fingers dipped into the cold water, scraped a few rocks away from the edge, swirled some more and then saw the gleaming shimmer of quicksilver show on the bottom of the pan. He continued washing until a tablespoon of quicksilver remained alone on the bottom, then poured it into a quart jar. He repeated the entire process. A greenhorn laughed. "Expect to pan out 'nough quick to buy beans for forty men, Digger? Need a couple hunert pounds!"

Digger just grinned and continued. Pan after pan, until the gravel was gone and his quart jar was almost filled with the shimmering quicksilver. He carried the jar over to the fire and cleaned out an iron pot, poured a little acid on the quicksilver and set the pot over the fire until the quicksilver disappeared and the gleam of melted gold remained. He had a chunk as big as a baby's fist. He looked up into the greenhorn's bewildered eyes and smiled. "There's a good sixteen ounces of pure gold, boy. Think that'll buy a couple sacks of beans?"

The men patted Digger on the back as he explained how he had gathered enough quicksilver and gold to buy the beans. "They's an old channel over by Indiana Hill. Cleaned out 'bout four years ago. The men dug a miner's ditch to get water, spiked a half mile of sluice box down a small ravine, an' cleaned up enough to go home in style. Loaded their pack animules up so heavy that each burro had to use crutches to get down to Sacramento! In them days, when you made a strike, you cleaned her up an' hit for civilization. Rememberin' their hurry, I figured they might'a missed some of the small stuff.

"Well, I sniped around half the night then took a look-see where the old sluice was. Had a hunch an' lowered some pieces of rope into their drill holes. Come mornin', the drill holes was froze solid so I pulled up them ropes, an' the ice held onto the gravel an' quicksiklver. Seen china boys dig the amalgam out'a drill

holes over by Dutch Flat one time."

THE MINERS warmed chilled hands over the fire, then with a determined jut to their hungry jaws, fell to work. Digger hiked down to the stamp mill site and noticed the piles of quartz ready to be ground. The end was in sight, if the water could be brought down the flume with sufficient force to turn the big wooden wheel. He hurried back up the cut and studied the progress of the flume builders.

"Sailor!" he shouted. "She 'bout ready to take the water?"

"She might'a," was the disgusted howl, "if somebody hadn't sawed the supports half way through! Take a look. Sawed from the back so's we wouldn't notice 'til we put the water in an' then she'd let go! The flume box is tight enough, but now we got her hangin' on cuss words. Need at least three foot of water to turn that stamp mill but now the flume ain't got 'nough underpinin's to hold more'n a trickle. We'll have to blast foundations an' prop her with more timbers!"

"Sailor, we ain't got time to prop up that flume or hunt for the feller that sawed the beams! He can wait, but the flume can't. Water's gotta be runnin' through her by mornin'. Look't them clouds; feel the air; she's settin' up to snow an' freeze black ice over the whole danged mountains!"

"If we run more'n an inch of water through this flume," warned sailor, "without them underpinin's, the flume'll come down off this cliff like a kid on a sled!"

"Call the Brothers' in," ordered Digger, "an' the rest of the flume crew. It's time to do a little gambling!"

Fires were built up and soon the weary brothers and their men lumbered down in helpless silence. The end was so near, and many a curse was heaped on the head of the skulker who had sawed the beams. Night shadows closed in and the ice particles danced in the air and carried the cheery flames high up on

[*Turn Page*]

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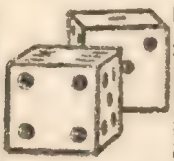

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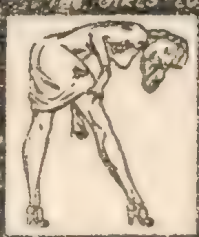

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DIGGER JOHN'S FLUME

the cliff. The flume staggered across the granite face and looked as frail as a bridge built of soggy hay.

Digger stood with his back to the fire and weighed his words. "We're gonna try somethin'," he said slowly, "that'll make men out'a boys, an' heroes out'a men! We're gonna run the water through that flume tonight! We're gonna brace that flume *with timbers of ice!* An'," his voice crackled with rage, "we're gonna *hold* that flume on the face of that cliff *with poles* until the ice is strong enough to hold it alone!"

The faces of the *Five Mile Flume Mining Company* gaped back at him palely in the flickering light. Finally Pike found voice. "Why we'd freeze in an hour! I'm not crazy enough to..."

Five Brothers reached out and pulled the speaker close. "Lissen," he gritted, "you'll do what Digger says you'll do! You got a chance to come out alive if'n you do, but if'n you quit now, I'll see that your body is fed through the stamp mill on the test run!"

Digger smiled pleasantly, "She'll work," he said. "Sailor, yore the lightest. Get into that flume an' drill a hole in the bottom right over every one of them sawed braces. Yore job'll be to stay in the flume an' see that ice don't form on the bottom. Five, yew get up at the head end an' let the water into the box 'bout an' inch deep. The rest of us'll get pike poles an' hold up the flume until the water dribbled down the supports an' freezes! Each man'll be relieved every thirty minutes an' come to the fire an' thaw out. Now hop to it, tonight forty men are goin' to drink up two barrels of whiskey!"

THAT NIGHT these veteran miners of the *Five Mile Flume Mining Company* bent but, like good raw-hide, did not break. Ice formed around the posts and healed the sabotaged cuts and the men stood through their half hour periods of hell, staggered to the fire, gulped redeye until it ran out of their ears, and staggered back to their posts.

Digger John, coated with ice,

made his reliefs and his bellow echoed through the canyon until dawn. He watched the light appear over the mountains and his roar of victory was returned by the squeak of the turning water wheel. The head of water was eased into full strength, until three feet of water charged down the boards and spun the wheel until three feet of water charged and chewed the quartz ore and spat out the gold!

The flume, held by its icy pillars, poured the water onto the mill wheel for a full ten days. The cold was on their side now. The men ate beans bought with Digger's gold and watched winter take over. Snow fluttered down and blanketed the canyon until it was impossible to stay longer. But, ten days was enough. When the boulders were removed from the mill and the clean-up scraped out, the take ran over a thousand ounces.

The *Five Mile Flume Mining Company* strode into Gold Run. They drank deep at Dredger's bar and the manager of the Boston Stock Company was sent for. He arrived in haste and, as he entered, the crowd silenced. Five Brothers finally spoke. "Hensley, your five hundred ounces is in Dredger Dan's safe; he'll turn it over to you in the morning an'..."

"Jest a minute, Five," interrupted Digger. "I think there'll be a condition to the payoff. Ain't exactly in the option contract but it'll save a hangin'. Hensley here, is gonna have to suffer a little for his money, like we suffered holding thet flume up with them pike poles. Dredger, get me a bucket of ice water!"

"T h e r e ' l l be *no* conditions," snarled Hensley. "Pay up or..."

Digger hefted the bucket of ice water, took a broom from the corner, pushed the bucket against the ceiling, grabbed Hensley by the neck, and shoved the broom handle into his hands. "Hold it there for an hour or so an' yew'll ge' the idea as to what we went through holdin' up that flume!"

Hensley took a long slow look around at the set faces then, without a word, gripped the broom handle in fearful silence.

THE STAFF OF LIFE

[*Continued From Page 82*]

fies me. I've made money here, but I've not been happy. I want to quit, but I don't want the thing I've built destroyed, for I still can't bear to see waste. I want to offer you the job of managing the place on the halves. Bring your own cattle over and feed them. Handle my blooded stuff, sell the best of it at the premium that MacDonald stuff will bring, and the rest at meat prices. You'll make more than you'll make on your own small place. It's a fine chance for a man o' your gumption."

Ladd Kane felt the thrill that comes with opportunity, for he knew that the MacDonald layout was a moneymaker—and then his enthusiasm died. MacDonald saw it in his face, and added quickly:

"My son will not bother you. He wants to go into business in some town back East. You can have a clause inserted in our allowing you to gradually buy my interest out of your earnings. I mean it, Kane, I've decided to go back home and stay. You're honest, and a hard worker, and I trust you. You've earned the right to run this ranch, and you can run it your own way."

"Will you, son? I'm an old man, and I'm tired... The place needs new blood....a younger hand at the rein."

Ladd Kane grinned at the tired old man, leaned over in his saddle and offered his hand:

"Sure I will, Mister Mac. You just start taking it easy from this minute on. You've earned the right."

A great invisible weight seemed to roll off the old man's shoulders, and his face softened. He seemed awfully old, and he was struggling with some kind of emotion. His misty eyes seemed to be looking toward some far-off land, and his lip was trembling.

Ladd Kane left him alone with his thoughts, and went and got the cattle started downhill toward the big haystacks.

WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT PIMPLES

Acne, Blackheads, and other externally caused Skin Blemishes

WHEN pimply skin is your problem, the first thing to get straight is that you *can* and *should* do something about it. To develop the attractiveness of your face is not mere vanity. It is an "open sesame" towards bringing the real YOU closer to other people and giving your personality the poise and confidence it needs. Your good qualities — intelligence, character, dignity — all go to naught... are completely cancelled out by a skin that "nobody loves to touch." Remember, the YOU that people see first is your face.

SKIN PROBLEMS DEMAND IMMEDIATE CARE

Medical statistics tell us that blemished skin usually occurs from adolescence on through adult life. The problem at the adolescent stage is serious enough to deserve attentive care as a family matter. In adulthood, when life's responsibilities are so much weightier, it is doubly important to exert great effort to eliminate these blemishes. And, there is no better time to get pimples under control than *now*.

DON'T ABUSE SKIN

The first instinctive reaction to pimples and blackheads is to squeeze them out with your fingers. A bit of experimentation along these lines soon provides convincing proof that this succeeds only in inflaming your skin and spreading the infection. Under no circumstances should pimples and blackheads ever be squeezed.

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MICROSCOPE SHOWS IMPORTANT BASIS FOR EXTERNALLY CAUSED PIMPLES AND BLACKHEADS

Let's take a look through the microscope to see what's behind those unsightly pimples. The high-powered lenses show your skin coated with a covering which originated from two sources—one, internally and the other, externally.

The internal substances on your skin include dead cells, residue from the sweat glands, and a high quantity of oil excreted by the sebaceous glands. A most important factor in skin disorders occurs when thousands of these tiny sebaceous glands discharge more oil than the skin can use for lubrication. Unless special care is given, the oil forms a heavy film which attracts foreign matter to your skin much as any oil mop picks up dust. These infectious external substances may be classified into three general groups:

1. Airborne materials such as dust, pollens, condensation products of smoke, vapors, etc.
2. Materials brought in contact with the skin, such as tiny fragments of clothing, bedding, cosmetics.
3. Micro-organisms such as bacteria and fungi.

See the difference between a healthy skin and a pimply skin in the microscopic reproductions below.

A. Normal skin **B. Sick, pimply skin**

Diagram A shows a normal-size, smoothly functioning sebaceous gland. Diagram B pictures sick, pimply skin. Notice that the sebaceous gland is a swollen mass of trapped oil, waste and infectious bacteria.

TRY THIS SENSIBLE WAY

Two sensible aims to achieve in controlling this skin condition are: to clear the pores of clogging matter, and to inhibit the excessive oiliness of the skin. Toward these ends, Dornol Products' research makes available two formulas. One is to aid in thorough cleansing by highly detergent penetration which simplifies the removal of waste and foreign matter. The other is to discourage oiliness with clinically-proved ingredients, and to kill infectious bacteria often associated with externally caused pimples and blackheads.

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